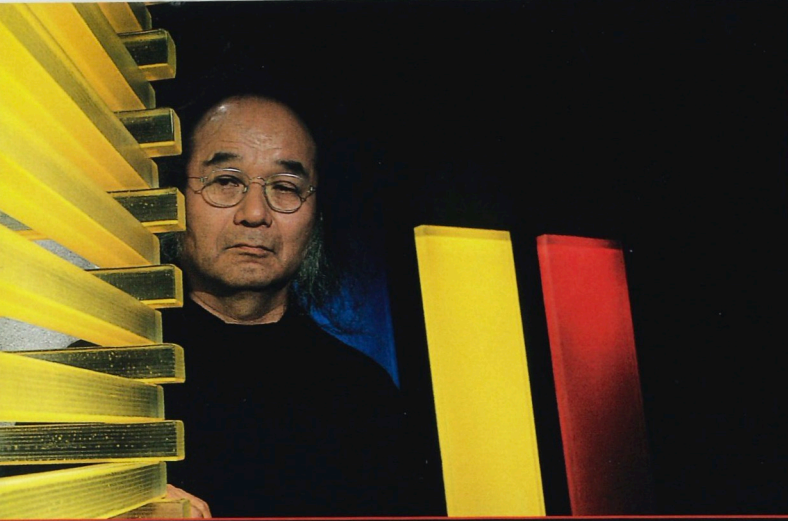


JUN KANEKO  
Freeways and cul-de-sacs





Jun Kaneko with glass sculpture formed at Bullseye Glass Company, Portland, Oregon, 2001. Photo: Russell Johnson.

JUN KANEKO'S LATEST ART-WORK IS BUT ONE COORDINATE ON THE ROADTRIP OF HIS CAREER. ISABELLA REICH REPORTS THAT HIS VIVID AND MONUMENTAL GLASS IS A PRODUCT OF OPPORTUNE INTERVENTION

THE DAY THAT I MEET HIM, JUN KANEKO IS A WINDSWEPT MAN, WITH LONG AND WILD HAIR, HIS HEAD IN THE CLOUDS AND HIS FEET PLANTED FIRMLY ON THE GROUND, not unlike one of his monolithic ceramic sculptures. In conversation, he embodies the archetypes of bohemian artist and venerable Japanese master rolled into one. Kaneko has made his name in ceramics and more specifically in his treatment of ceramics as a sculptural material capable of massive dimensions. He is famous in the art world for extraordinarily large, kiln-defying rotund ceramic forms that he calls *dangos*, Japanese for 'dumplings'. Fragile clay forms these are not. His giant ceramic head shapes were the face of the international object extravaganza, SOFA (Sculptural Objects and Functional Art) Chicago '98. His distinctive and prolific ceramic practice spans over 35 years, and is peppered with awards and grants honouring his conceptual achievements in this field, such as the Lifetime Achievement Award he received at the annual NCECA (National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts) conference in 1994.

Now, Kaneko has departed from this ceramic corpus with his latest work in which he turns his hand to the clear-cut intensity of glass. The expansive American glass studio, Bullseye Glass in Portland, Oregon, was the host of these explorations. The result of this collaboration was an ethereal installation of vivid and glowing constructions in cast and kiln-formed glass. Shaped into slabs, sculptures and a six-metre long curving wall of glass, these pieces are stamped with Kaneko's characteristic preoccupation with proportion. Kaneko was originally a painter, born in Japan and trained under Satoshi Ogawa, before a chance meeting with ceramics collector Fred Marer on the day



that he arrived in America in 1963, set him on the path to ceramics. Kaneko had travelled to America to study painting, but a stint house-sitting for Marer led to him organising Marer's extensive ceramic collection. With the collection around him Kaneko's curiosity was ignited, and so started his ceramic endeavours.

Kaneko's current digression into glass is the similar product of such an opportune intervention, proposed to him by Bullseye where he went to work in 1998 for a

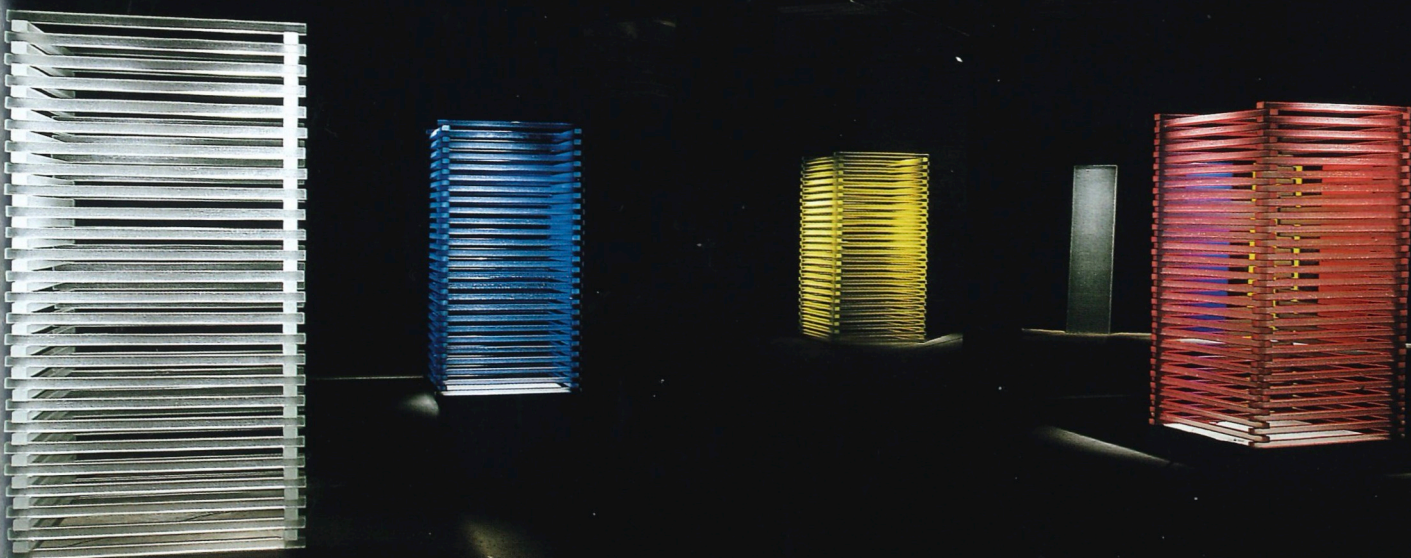
and running with them, even as he admits with wry humour "sometimes I know I may be making a big mistake".

There is nothing mistaken about the big, incandescent constructions in glass that came to life at Bullseye, fabricated at their factory over a five-month period and completed in 2001. These pieces resolutely recast many of the formal concerns of Kaneko's ceramic work, liberated from clay and testing their voices in glass.

few weeks to experiment with the lucid material. "I wasn't really thinking about doing anything in glass, but because Bullseye asked me, I thought it might be an interesting opportunity. Usually that's how I work. I like to go with the flow." The seemingly marked shifts in direction that punctuate Kaneko's artistic career—one which has been receptive to side roads as well as freeways and the occasional cul-de-sac—is reflective of his unstructured and organic approach to making and the generation of ideas. "I went [to Bullseye] to explore if there was any possibility for myself, even to develop my own interest in the material. And then I took everything back to my studio in Omaha, to look at it. So I lived with the experimental work, thinking about new possibilities." Kaneko is good at picking up ideas

They play with pattern, repetition and size, though in the hard-edge clarity of glass instead of the soft malleability of clay. The shift in material to glass remains intimately tied to his ceramics, with some pieces actual transcriptions of previous ceramic work, such as a solid glass ball nestling in a semi-circular curved housing. The threaded lines of colour that bleed across the glass face of his sinuous 'wave' wall similarly take their inspiration from the patina of striped colours and glazes initially inscribed across the surfaces of clay slabs and tiles. "The idea could be the same as in my ceramics, but how I make the piece is how I see the possibilities of the new material. If there is no contribution from new material to similar idea then it is not successful."

Below: Jun Kaneko, foreground: *Clear, Blue, Yellow and Red Sticks*, kilnformed Bullseye glass, 2001. Each sculpture 200(h) x 107 (w) x 107(d)cm. Background: *Clear Slab*, kilnformed Bullseye glass, 2001. 198(h) x 51(w) x 5(d)cm. Installation at Bullseye Connection Gallery. Photos: Russell Johnson.







Jun Kaneko, *Layered, kilnformed Bullseye sheet*, 2001. 24(h) x 49.5(w) x 7.5(d)cm.  
Photo: Russell Johnson.

So what does Kaneko feel he has gotten from glass? With a poker face he admits that he didn't really like glass, but he had friends who worked with the material who urged him to try it. He says that it is a difficult material to get a handle on because of the extreme transformations it goes through from solid to liquid. Literally, you can't hold it to shape it—in this sense glass is more insubstantial than clay. However, what interested Kaneko about glass was its translucency. "With the pieces that I am making now, I need to think about how light goes through, how light bounces, the reflectiveness of the material." Thinking about the translucent quality of glass added an extra dimension to the structures that are the conceptual opposite to his solid and heavy ceramic *dangos*—square, ethereal glass cages made from long, thin slats of cast glass, that perforate the space inside and beyond. These are a revisitation of similar slatted structures that Kaneko made in clay over 10 years ago. "I am seeing where different angles of light are coming in, playing with the light and the way glass holds the light. People move around the piece, you can see people's movements through the spaces as they move around it." The ability to 'see through' the material becomes a structural and conceptual characteristic exploited by Kaneko in these constructions.

He first explored glass in 1974, saying, "when I am doing experimental work, with my process it takes at least 10 to 15 years to come out". The gestation period between concept and actual object is important to Kaneko, who likes to give an idea time to sit before taking it further if it is still potent. In this way, he refines and rubs away at the nub of an idea in his mind as though it was a smooth pebble. He sees his work as a collaboration with circumstance and environment rather than imposing a strict conceptual determinism, a distinctly eastern sensibility that seems to be a residue of his years in Japan. "Sometimes an idea stays in the back of my mind, it disappears for a while. If it reappears from the back of my mind, whether it is an old idea or a new idea, if it is interesting again then I

do it. Because there must be some reason that it came back." This kind of patient logic colours Kaneko's way of working, giving his pieces an air of unhurried solemnity that is also a result of their overgrown size. On the matter of size, he says, "really, I don't think my art is big. You have to realise, it's a continuous progression over 35 years and it just got bigger and bigger. Always when I make pieces, it is not just the piece itself but its relationship to the space around it that has my attention. I don't think of my artwork as separate from the environment—it always depends on what it is next to. It's about proportion." He gets excited by the relative measurement of scale that binds the relationship between small and large objects, and scale in nature. For Kaneko, it is not so much the discrete size of the object, as it is the object's power to draw the viewer into it, abolishing a sense of scale.

Kaneko's thoughtful work slots into space like a giant Lego construction, emerging from a slow and considered editing process. He holds fast to the belief that the artist is an editor, both in terms of concept and material, constantly tweaking and fine-tuning the end product. Reworking the same object in another material—as he has done with his glass pieces—distils the concept further. His conceptual roots are in the Abstract Expressionism rife in America when he first landed there in the 1960s, paring back shapes and forms to an essential geometry. "People think I'm only in ceramics, but my conceptual interest is not really ceramics. I know clay well so I use it, but at the same time I keep myself open to a whole number of different opportunities. That is the real issue of my making." Recycling tried-and-true ideas in new materials achieves a strong lineage of concept while importing the potentials of the different material. Alongside a willingness to experiment however, is a maker's commitment to the material he uses, whether clay or glass or something else. "It is a useful exercise trying to develop good technical ability because when you work with a material for a long time you really get to know it, but you have to be careful not to be trapped in a circle."



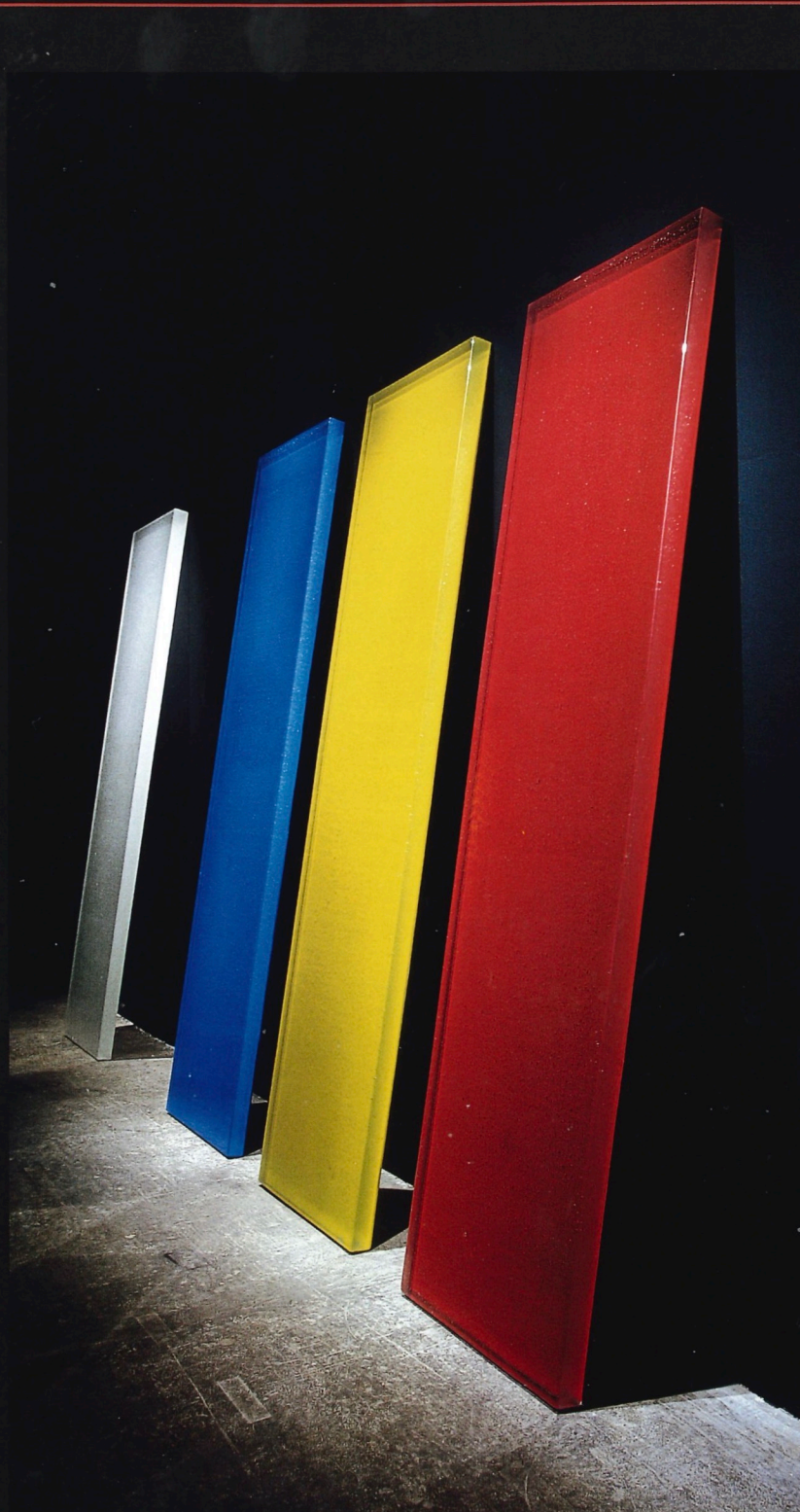
When I question him as to whether his work in glass has made him look at his ceramic work differently, he answers pragmatically "I'm not sure it's as easy as that". Once more we return circuitously to the concept of time, the time that it takes for influence to filter down significantly. In this, he genuflects to the long history of ceramics in Japan, which he draws from philosophically. "I'm conscious of the traditional ceramic craftsmanship in Japan, how it helped me to develop, and how this tradition developed over

patterned paving..." You can't overlook this man's substantial ideas nor his work with its monumental proportions.

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centuries. They tried and thought and tried and thought, and then finally refined certain ideas and techniques. So when I see that, I think about what I'm doing as a very small contribution." He is conscious of being a part of an artistic continuum, straddling the ascetic tradition of ceramics in Japan and the conceptual position of contemporary ceramics in America. He sees his art in terms of bigger pictures and greater schemes, rather than instant gratification. In this sense, his latest work in glass is but one coordinate on the roadtrip of his career, preceded by certain reverberations and no doubt to be followed by certain aftershocks. Who can say what these will be?

Jun Kaneko remains enamoured by clay—it is what he is most practiced in and as a result is at once familiar and seductive. His abiding respect for the ceramic tradition in Japan is located in the exhaustive technical knowledge of clay cultivated in this tradition, one that included finding and making their own clay. The pre-packaged availability of modern life means that Kaneko has not needed to go through this process, leading him to add somewhat sorrowfully "there is clay in the ground all around us, but I don't know what it looks like, it could be fantastic clay. I'm not saying that the traditional way is better, but it definitely made a huge difference in understanding material". This is the fundamental kind of understanding of clay that Kaneko says he wants to pursue now—to understand its very constitution. However towards the end of our discussion he says "I'm not sure if I want to make anything now. Somehow I feel I've done everything". Then he adds with a grin, "or maybe I'll find another way of living with clay and still make pieces". The irrepressible energy that is manifest in his work animates him once again, and he gestures around the immediate area that is the setting for our interview, an outdoor space on Sydney's harbour. "I have a tendency to try and look for some kind of order. Let's say, if somebody were to ask me to do something here, you could make a strong, vigorous statement with the paving. It would define this space with much more order than it has now—



Jun Kaneko, *Clear, Blue, Yellow and Red Slabs*, kilnformed Bullseye glass, 2001. Each slab 198(h) x 51(w) x 5(d)cm. Photo: Russell Johnson.



# JUN KANEKO speaks

> What are you in Australia for?

"ClayFeast, a ceramic gathering at Gulgong, New South Wales."

> Where is your ceramics studio?

"Omaha, Nebraska."

> How did your upbringing in Japan influence your work?

"First of all, when I went to the US I was still immature as an artist, but at the same time my life in Japan definitely shaped my art, but I see it as: I grew up in Japan, then I went to America and I ended up staying there. So it's a continuation of my life here and now and obviously I'm not denying that there is no influence but I see this as a continuous thing."

> Who inspires you when you look at other artist's work?

"Most of my inspiration is not from art. A lot of my inspiration is from nature, or from looking at how people do things, especially with different materials. The material and people and then nature is part of it—the good thing about this is that it's simple."

> Which people in particular?

"I am very much influenced by the artist Satoshi Ogawa. He is probably the strongest influence. I've liked his paintings ever since I was 17, and I still think his paintings are among the best. Definitely also Peter Voulkos. He is in my mind one of the best ceramic artists."

> What is the aesthetic lineage of your work? Where does it come from?

"I'm not sure, but looking back I've spent at least three-quarters of my life on the issue of pattern-making."

> What does pattern mean to your work?

"Pattern to me is the basis of making visual work. Usually when you make a mark you think a lot about the actual mark but not too much about the space in which you make it. I've realised that this space is equally as important as the mark. That made a big impact on my work, my consciousness of making. Making order in a space with marks seems to be like making sound and silence. It has a really interesting similarity in possibility to music."

> How have your public art projects extended your work?

"It is interesting doing public art projects—it has completely different issues to personal art. With personal art I have total freedom, but with public art you are working with an existing environment, the space is already defined. The scale is also different—it can be bigger than gallery work."

> Scale is quite important to your work. What are your thoughts on this?

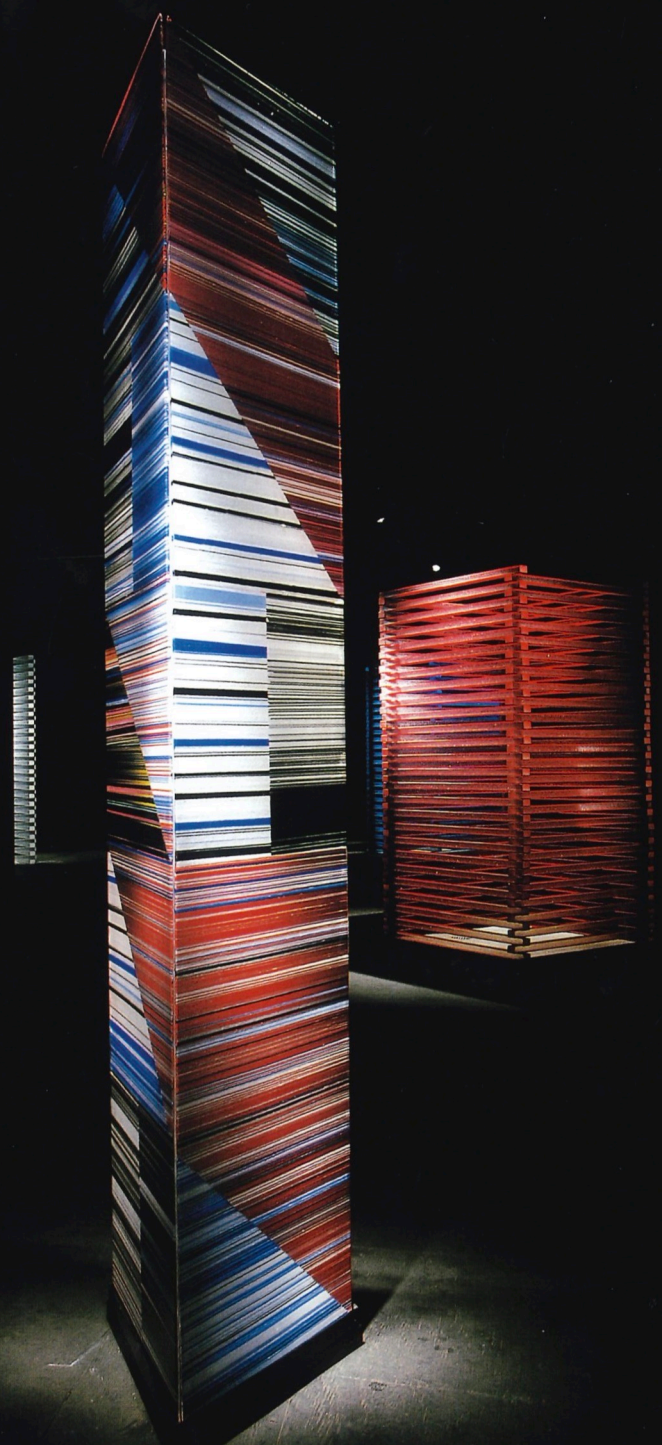
"If everything in the world is the same size, then there is no issue of scale. Because the size of things in the world differ, we can see it, scale, but it is a measurement we create. I really think what is fundamental is not size - sometimes 'small' makes a better piece and sometimes 'large' makes a better piece—but what is interesting is the relationship between the two."





Top: Jun Kaneko,  
installation of *Slabs,  
Arches and Sticks* at  
Bullseye Connection  
Gallery, May 2001.

Right: Jun Kaneko,  
foreground: *Light  
Tower*, kilnformed  
Bullseye threads and  
sheet glass, 2001.  
223.5(h), each of 3  
sides: 45.5(w)cm.  
Background: *Clear,  
Blue and Red Sticks*.  
Photos: Russell  
Johnson.







# JUN KANEKO

Jun Kaneko, *Untitled*,  
cast glass. 42(h) x  
48(d) x 30.5(w)cm.  
Photo: Russell  
Johnson.

- |      |   |      |  |
|------|---|------|--|
| 1942 | Born 13 July in Nagoya, Japan.  |      | Education in the Ceramic Arts) conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.   |
| 1961 | Studies painting under Satoshi Ogawa in Nagoya, Japan.  | 1996 | Holds a major touring exhibition of his work produced over 2 years during a European Ceramic Work Centre residency in 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands that opens at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, the Netherlands. |
| 1963 | Arrives in Los Angeles, California to study painting. Meets ceramic collector Fred Marer, and stays with him to organise his ceramic collection. Works with clay for the first time during a week at Scripps College with Paul Soldner. | 1998 | Experiments with glass work at Bullseye Glass in Portland, Oregon. Also acquires a large warehouse space that is the future site of the Jun Kaneko Museum.   |
| 1965 | Studies Ceramics at the Chouinard Institute of Art, Los Angeles under Ralph Bacera.   | 2000 | Begins work on a public wall project at the Beaverton City Library.  |
| 1967 | Studies under Peter Voulkos at the University of California, Berkeley.  | 2001 | Debut glass show at the Bullseye Connection Gallery, Portland, Oregon; and a Bullseye presentation at SOFA Chicago 2001.   |
| 1969 | Enrolls at Claremont College and studies Ceramics under Paul Soldner.   |      |  |
| 1975 | Moves back to Japan to construct a large-scale studio and kiln house in Nagura.   |      |  |
| 1979 | Takes on a teaching position as Head of the Ceramics Department at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.  |      |  |
| 1983 | Makes his first dangos, which measure 2.1 x 1.5 x 1.8m, at the Omaha Brickworks, Omaha, Nebraska.   |      |  |
| 1986 | Leaves his position at Cranbrook and moves to Omaha, Nebraska to develop his largest studio space yet, a four-story building covering 3530m <sup>2</sup> which is completed in 1990.  |      |  |
| 1994 | Receives a Lifetime Achievement Award at the annual NCECA (National Council on  |      |  |

#### endnotes

A new book on Jun Kaneko has just been released: *Jun Kaneko* by Susan Petersen, 2001, published by Laurence King Publishing, email: enquiries@calmann-king.co.uk web: www.laurence-king.com

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