

November 24, 2008

## Zen Abstraction

By Donald Kuspit

Jun Kaneko is known for his “dango” sculptures -- ceramic sculptures, sometimes heads, their eyes closed in meditation, sometimes structures that could function as vessels, except that they have no opening. All are monumentally grand -- usually figure-sized -- and the latter have vivid, decorative surfaces. Last month saw a wonderful display of the vessel-like shapes on the roof of the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia. Flanked by modern skyscrapers, they look boldly archaic. They have full,

rounded bodies, and their varied surfaces suggest that they have different personalities: they seem uncannily human, especially next to the impersonal structures of the boxy skyscrapers. They have character, certainly compared to the featureless buildings. Hermetically sealed, they seem to hide a mystery, while the glass skyscrapers have nothing to hide: one can see right through them, in more ways than one. The sculptures are as abstract as the skyscrapers, but their geometry is more subtle, their material natural rather than artificial, and they are hand-crafted and individualized rather than mass produced and collective in import.



Jun Kaneko, “Dangos: Roof Garden Installation,” at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia

“Dango” is the Japanese term for “dumpling” -- a tidbit of tasty food, often eaten whole in one pleasurable swallow, or in a bite or two. Kaneko’s dumplings can’t be swallowed whole -- they’re too big for that -- but they are rich with tasteful sensations. Streak after streak of changing color permeates the surface, setting the dango in visual movement. There are also small gray circles, each in a ring of bright color, growing meteoric tails as they move down the dango, making invisible gravity visible while underscoring its roundedness. Another surface is covered from top to bottom -- almost -- with white and black horizontal bands. The black drips into the white, the white drips into the black, and finally drops in free fall down the sides of the dango, in a gesture of spontaneity that nonetheless is systematic, and forms part of a grid system. Despite these dynamic patterns -- there are many more, and my words can’t do them esthetic justice -- the dangos seem peculiarly static. As I have suggested, they seem to be turned in on themselves, suggesting they are tranquilly detached from the exciting interplay of abstract forms on their skin.



Jun Kaneko, Untitled, 1999  
 Jun Kaneko, "Dangos: Roof Garden Installation," at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia

When I went to see them, I also saw the Philadelphia Opera Company's production of Beethoven's *Fidelio*, with costumes and stage designed by Kaneko. To my eye, his stage design, which included a transparent curtain-screen for the stage -- the curtain was a screen on which Kaneko's designs were video projected -- was much more to the abstract point of his dangos. The costumes seemed like elementary exercises in eccentric abstraction, which is why they seemed formally inert, while the stage and curtain-screen designs were much more dynamically daring. The costumes were clever, the stage and curtain-screen designs had a Zen effect. The latter involved grids, changing from shimmering colors to cage-like black and white, as the opera progressed to the final prison scene. The colorful lines of Kaneko's grid dripped down the curtain-screen like festive

streamers, the rhythm of their movement attuned to the rhythm of the music. One seemed to be watching a three-dimensional musical painting in the making.

Each color-saturated drip accompanied a musical note, bringing to mind Kandinsky's idea that each color made a sound, and that composition involved orchestrating them. The painter was a composer-conductor of colorful symphonies. (Kaneko's are somewhat more orderly, if also seemingly spontaneously generated or self-created.)

(Florestan, unjustly imprisoned, is freed and joined by his wife Leonore, who entered the prison disguised as the boy *Fidelio*, whom the jailor's daughter fell in love with. Did Beethoven symbolically resolve a bisexual conflict, not to say gay tendencies, as his letter to his nephew seems to suggest? Musically discharging the tension of the emotional and social conflict and confusion built up in course of the opera, the grand choral climax seems to prefigure the "Hymn to Joy" in his Ninth Symphony. It has a similar chest-thumping manic energy -- almost violent but under formal control -- suggesting a triumph over emotional as well as social adversity.)

By Zen effect I mean that however homogeneously structured Kaneko's grid -- dialectically composed of heterogeneous colors or colorless black and white, its simplicity becomes deceptive -- it has what Zen Buddhists call "thusness" or "suchness" (*tathata* in Japanese), or, as I would say, an ontological immediacy of presence. I'm prob-



A scene from *Fidelio*, directed by Robert Driver and designed by Jun Kaneko, as presented by the Opera Company of Philadelphia, October 2008  
Photo: Kelly & Massa Photography

ably overstating my point -- I have to because it's not self-evident -- but Kaneko's colorful lines have the projective power of a *katsu*, the shouted exclamation used to punctuate Zen discourse. Dare I say that Kaneko's abstract grid is a sort of Zen discourse, for it has the brevity, "emphatic arrangement," and completeness of vision -- dynamic clarity -- characteristic of the haiku form. I am not saying that it is a haiku, only that it has the intensity and concentration of one -- writ large on a curtain-screen, and in pure visual rather than verbal form. Kaneko's

color lines -- his drips, dots, and bands in general -- rhyme with each other, however subtly off the rhyme. They form a visual concrete poetry that repeats its few basic terms -- there's a minimalist aspect to the design, although it has a plenitude of presence that minimalist works don't often have (less is indeed less in most of them) -- with growing force. Yet the grid never loses its overall serenity, hypnotic-meditative appeal, and togetherness.

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The Japanese terms and their English translation are from the glossary in Robert Aitken's *A Zen Wave* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1978).

Jun Kaneko, "Dangos: Roof Garden Installation," Oct. 4-Nov. 8, 2008, at Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, Philadelphia, Pa. 19106

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