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## Art: The satisfactions of 'slow' material art

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It's curious that none of the three finalists for the first Jack Wolgin international fine arts prize of \$150,000, to be awarded Oct. 22, works in traditional art media. The prize was announced last year as intending to reward "new ways of working within the mediums of painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography, ceramics, metals, glass and/or fibers."

Note the emphasis on material art - media and ways of working that produce objects. Yet one finalist makes films, another videos, and the third installations whose objects are conceptual, not material. Apparently someone changed his or her mind about what kinds of art were worth considering. (Edith Newhall reviews the finalists' work on Page H6.)

It's unfortunate that material art wasn't given at least one slot, because it offers satisfactions lacking in film and video. While those may be more au courant and appealing to people attuned to mass media, they lack the sensuous physicality of art objects that speak through mass, tactility, and spatial presence.

"Material art" is a term that William Daley used last month in his talk at the opening of an exhibition of his ceramic vessels at Swarthmore College.

Daley revealed a passionate devotion to his material - stoneware clay - not only because he enjoyed the hands-on shaping of it into complex architectonic forms, but also because this process generates a dialogue: He pushes the material, and sometimes the material produces feedback, a dynamic critical to abstract expressionist painting.

Material art can be two- or three-dimensional, although, as Daley's vessels demonstrate, its allure is strongest with media that are worked with the hands or with tools.

The physical presence of his work is forceful and inescapable. His large unglazed



A 2007 glazed stoneware "dango" by Jun Kaneko is consciously monumental, expressing materiality through scale.



Jun Kaneko's "dangos" in the Perelman Building of the Art Museum: The boldly patterned "dumpling" monoliths, specimens of material art, don't concede anything to more technological media in their ability to stir emotions and evoke primal connections.

vessels - based on the shape formed by two overlapping circles, known as a vesica - develop complex geometries and interactions between interior volumes and exterior topographies.

They're splendid examples of what I like to call "slow art," not only because they take time to make, but also because they require time to absorb and understand. The longer one looks - and this process can involve years, as it has for me -

the more one is able to appreciate both the formal ingenuity and seductiveness of the compositions and the perceptual dualities they generate.

For instance, Daley's pieces can seem both humble because of their reddish, raw-clay color and regal because of their carefully calculated symmetries. Likewise, their character is timeless; they could be contemporary or archaeological.

Like geologic strata, these 15 vessels make time stand still, they make one forget the moment and think about the longer continuum of history. This quality might be the most valuable contribution that slow art makes to modern life, where time zips by more quickly than many of us can manage.

Slow art like Daley's restores a more reasonable balance between perception and contemplation. Like slow food and slow media (i.e., newspapers, magazines and books), they allow one to digest an aesthetic experience at one's own pace. Time and sequence don't matter; you can circle around the art as often as you wish.

At his opening, Daley offered his audience a rare indulgence, and one that only slow art can provide. He invited people to touch and caress his pieces, normally strictly verboten in museums and galleries. What better way to connect with the material than to stroke its surface?

Another American master of ceramic art, Jun Kaneko, a prominent presence in Philadelphia this month, affirms the timeless allure of slow art in a somewhat different way. Kaneko's analog to Daley's vesicas are his boldly patterned dangos, Japanese for dumplings.

These thrusting, imposing monoliths are elemental, lingalike forms glazed in colorful bands, drips, and repetitive marks. The surfaces are shiny and smooth, although in a



raking light one can see that the surfaces ripple slightly.

Last year, Kaneko showed a group of dumplings, some in solid colors, on the roof of Locks Gallery on Washington Square, where he has a show of smaller works this month. There are also five dangos in the Kimmel Center through Oct. 31 and four more in the Perelman building of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, through March 19. Two of his huge heads sit in the courtyard of City Hall through Oct. 24.

(This KanekoFest advertises the artist's participation, as designer of sets and costumes, in the Opera Company of Philadelphia's production of *Madama Butterfly*, which opened Friday at the Academy of Music; last year, his presence at Locks was connected with his similar role in the staging of the Opera Company's *Fidelio*.)

Kaneko's sculptures are more consciously monumental than Daley's vessels, and they express their materiality through scale. Color and pattern impart vitality to the otherwise featureless monoliths. Daley, by contrast, expresses materiality more directly, by creating sculpted relief features, like abstracted landscapes in the round.

These bold specimens of material art don't concede anything to more technological media in their ability to stir emotions and evoke primal connections to the physical universe.

In fact, connecting to the continuum of human experience, historical as well as cosmological, is something that material art - slow art - accomplishes more effectively than more transient modes of expression.

The current displays of material art here recall the time not long ago when some art pundits were proclaiming that painting was dead. Well, obviously painting not only didn't die, it continues to flourish.

It does so because both artists and the public refuse to give it up. It continues to fill a fundamental need for a tangible connection between brain, eye, and hand that artists enjoy and that many art viewers find comforting.

Material art provides an anchor to a communal aesthetic heritage that goes back millennia. This isn't to dismiss the efforts of the Wolgin artists; their art expands the conversation, but it doesn't render obsolete what artisan-artists such as Daley and Kaneko bring forth with their hands.