



## **Untitled (Head) by June Kaneko**

Speaker: Nahed Mansour, Curator of Programs and Education

### Audio Tour Transcription

Welcome to the Gardiner Plaza. As part of our Gardiner Goes Outside initiative, we are reimagining the museum experience and bringing the art outside to you. I'm Nahed Mansour, the Curator of Programs and Education and I'll be speaking about contemporary artist Jun Kaneko's monumental glazed ceramic sculpture head. Kaneko was born in Japan in 1942 during the Second World War. Inspired by his mother's pastime of painting, Kaneko studied painting in Japan, until he moved to Los Angeles in his early twenties. There, he continued his artistic studies, which soon expanded to sculptural ceramics.

Over the past 60 years, Kaneko has been an active and influential figure in contemporary American ceramics and is world-renowned for pushing the boundaries of scale and experimenting with clay surfaces.

The head sculpture you see on the first level of the Gardiner's outdoor plaza garden was acquired in 2013 as part of the Museum's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. Like most of Kaneko's work over the last 30 years, the scale of the head is large for hand-built ceramic art, displaying Kaneko's technical skills in handling large-scale clay pieces.

Weighing 1200 lbs., the size of the sculpture heightens the physical presence and undeniably transforms the Museum's entrance space on University Avenue. A steel table holds the 6-foot head sculpture. The identity of the subject is non-descript, lacking clear markers of gender, race, or age. To add, the subject's face evinces little expression. With closed eyes, the subject looks relaxed but not asleep. Without any hair or ears, the sides and back of the sculpture are rounded and smooth, and black-and-white stripes wrap around the form.

Installed some feet above street level, the majority of museum goers and passersby approaching the Museum will consciously or unconsciously look up to view the large-scale work. This reaction of lifting your neck to view the work hints at the way that the sculpture physically activates viewers around the Museum's entrance and changes their relationship to the space around them. Additionally, the psychological effect of looking up breaks from day-to-day social interactions happening at eye level, and hints at a pause to witness something greater than oneself.

In a 2005 interview with Mary McInnes, Kaneko speaks about his interest in making pieces that require the viewer to look up, noting "I don't know anyone who is really sad when they are looking up. Usually people look up when they feel good and feeling up."

Kaneko is driven by the conceptual questions that his monumental sculptures invoke in the viewer. Here I want to pause and ask you: How do you feel when you look up at the sculpture? How does your experience of the sculpture change as you walk around it? Do you notice the optical effect or interplay of the repeating light and dark stripes on its surface? How does the sculpture effect your relationship to the natural, human, and architectural spaces around you?

Personally, as I look at Kaneko's head sculpture, I feel two contradictory feelings that reflect the sculpture's figurative form and its abstracted surfaces. On the one hand, I feel relaxed when looking at the subject's tranquil face. I also feel a sense of intimacy, knowing that unlike most of the objects inside the Museum, I'm able to touch this public sculpture. However, despite the subject's calm demeanour and approachability, the scale of the sculpture makes me feel intimidated by its presence, which seems to assert a domineering power over me.

Kaneko's head at the Gardiner Museum is an ideal example of how he uses his background in painting to transform clay forms into large 3D canvases. It also showcases how Kaneko uses pattern to experiment with colour and space, providing the illusion of black and grey stripes undulating as one moves around the sculpture.

The experimental qualities of this pieces, alongside their pristine technical execution, demonstrate why Kaneko holds such an esteemed status in modern ceramics. Kaneko's head sculpture is one of about 60 Kaneko public art commissions that can be found near libraries,

hospitals, and museums around the world. The Gardiner Museum is incredibly honoured to house this monumental ceramic sculpture at our entrance.

Artwork credits:

Jun Kaneko (Japanese, 1942-)

*Untitled (head)*, 2002

Glazed ceramic and steel

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