

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## The Spontaneous Art of Kazuo Kadonaga

BY BRANDON GRIGGS THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE ARTS

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At at first glance, Kazuo Kadonaga's artworks are baffling: An enormous cedar log, carved with parallel lines. A row of 15-foot-long bamboo poles, leaning against a wall. A beehive-shaped mound of glass.

Study them closely, however, and the unique vision behind Kadonaga's curious creations begins to emerge. At a time when many trends in, contemporary art are exhausted, Kadonaga is that rare artist whose work is strikingly original - if impractical for home display by the average collector.

His solo exhibit, subtitled "Wood Paper Bamboo Glass," opened Friday at the newly remodeled Salt Lake Art Center, where it will remain through Nov.25. Spanning 20 years of work by the Japanese-born International artist, it marks the first show in the center's main gallery since its staircase entryway was reconfigured to create more exhibition space for the 2002 Winter Olympics.

The roomier gallery feels appropriate for Kadonaga's large-scale sculptural pieces, some of which need the perspective of distance to be appreciated. To truly understand Kadonaga's work, however, requires some background into how he makes it.

"Kazuo has always been more interested in the [artistic] process than in any artifact itself," says Salt Lake Art Center director Ric Collier, who curated the show. "While the resulting works are beautiful and mysterious, they are but by-products of his consuming passion to pursue the unknown through . . . the manipulation of natural materials. "

A Longtime fan of Kadonaga's work, Collier first encountered the artist 16 years ago in Los Angeles. Collier curated a solo Kadonaga show in Corpus Christi Tex., in 1988 and has been trying to bring the artist to Utah since becoming director of the Salt Lake Art Center five years ago.



**Translucent green glass forms a beehive shape in  
"Glass No 4 M."**

When Kadonaga began making art in earnest in 1971, he was drawn to wood-not because he loved its feel but because his family ran a lumber mill in northern Japan and wood was plentiful and cheap. In subsequent years, he experimented with paper, silk and glass. With a simplicity characteristic of his native country, Kadonaga tinkers with these raw materials to see how they respond when physically altered or exposed to changes in their environment.

For example, one of the exhibit's pieces is a bark less cedar log about 15 feet long.

Kadonaga used a table saw to slice the log length wise into hundreds of paper-thin sheets, then reassembled it. As the wood responds to changes in temperature and humidity, the paper-thin sheets buckle or curl - changing the log's appearance. In this way, Kadonaga lets his materials dictate their ultimate shape. The end result is random, unpredictable and fluid.

For one installation years ago, Kadonaga dried a number of cedar and bamboo pieces until they were on the verge of cracking, then placed them in a gallery. Visitors were asked to sit on a nearby chair; if they kept quiet they could hear the wood cracking, revealing the two materials' distinct aural as well as visual characteristics.

Equally fascinating are Kadonaga's mounds of translucent green glass, each lit from above by a spot light that makes them appear to glow from within. After years of experimentation, Kadonaga became intrigued with the viscous quality of molten glass. He developed a system to melt glass in a kiln at 2,600 degrees, then drip it continuously onto a cooling furnace below, creating layered, billowing shapes that take more than three months to harden.

The results conjure images of space-alien larva or soft-serve ice cream. They are a far cry from the sculpted glass of Dale Chihuly whose colorful creations will inhabit the gallery during the Olympics.

Speaking through an interpreter, Kadonaga says he enjoys the spontaneity of his work. He doesn't imagine ahead of time how his pieces

will evolve, nor does he have any expectations about how they will look when finished. He likes to keep his artistic process as simple as possible.

In a catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, critic Josine Ianco Starrels calls Kadonaga's works "simple, stark and without artifice, yet uncommonly impressive." Ianco Starrels said she had never before seen wood or glass "presented simply as the elements they were, the heart of their matter. Prior to this, they had appeared as materials acted on by the artist. Wood had always been roughly hewn, smoothly sanded, skillfully carved. This was different. The longer I looked at the elements before me, the clearer the artist's intent became; the essence of the material superseded the maker's will."

Whether or not you enjoy Kadonaga's art — and his deceptively simple works may leave some observers scratching their heads - you could visit every art gallery in Utah and not see anything like it. And that's a compliment.

■ At Salt Lake Art Center

"Kazuo Kadonaga: Wood Paper Bamboo Glass" will be exhibited through Nov. 25 at the Salt Lake Art Center, 20 S. West Temple in Salt Lake City. The center is open every day but Monday; admission, as always, is free.



Handmade paper is layered "Paper No.1BF," a 1983 work by Kazuo Kadonaga