

Artist Kazuo Kadonaga, in Ashland to supervise the installation of his exhibit, "Wood, Paper, Bamboo, Glass," says he strives to, reveal the inner nature of the medium, rather than forcing it to conform to his vision.

Mail Tribune photos  
Bob Pennell

## Elemental art

*Kazuo Kadonaga, whose work is showing at the Schneider, lets the material speak for itself*

By **BILL VARBLE**  
Mail Tribune

**W**ood, paper, bamboo and glass each have an inner nature, Kazuo Kadonaga believes. As the 56-year-old Japanese artist sees it, his job is not to create something new out of such materials so much as to penetrate their inner nature.

"Wood, Paper, Bamboo, Glass," an exhibit of artworks by Kadonaga, opens today (Oct. 18) at the Schneider Museum in Ashland.

Kadonaga exhibits art ranging from pieces of

bamboo to burned logs to giant blobs of glass in Japan, Europe and the United States. Critics have reached deep into their tool bags to invent labels for his work: process art, conceptual art, post-minimalist wholism and even post-industrial romanticism. Kadonaga's art contains echoes of a Japanese style called mono-ha, or "the school of things."

Some critics claim to have seen in his works an influence of Shintoism, the traditional, nature-based religion of Japan.

Speaking through his wife, Yumiko, who acts as his interpreter, Kadonaga, who traveled to

Ashland for the exhibit, says he does not make a mental picture of a finished artwork ahead of time.

"I try to let the material work by itself," he says. "I'm interested in making a system for them to explore themselves."

Rather than seeing the material as a blank slate to be shaped to the artist's will, he approaches it as if it had an inherent nature to be revealed.

"I try to find one method for each material," he says, "For wood, burning and cutting. The glass by dripping. ... By cutting wood we can find a new aspect we have never seen or to which we didn't pay any attention. We might have seen cracked wood, but we didn't really pay attention."

Sometimes, as in his large, poured-glass sculptures, it's as if Kadonaga were honoring industrial processes much as romantics once honored the processes of nature.

Kadonaga burst onto the Japanese art world while still in his 20s. The prestigious Artist Today Exhibition of 1973 introduced him to the public and to high-profile artists. Drawn to the wood at his family's lumber mill as a medium, he says he became fascinated with the material's reactions to physical and environmental changes.

But he's not drawn to high-flown aesthetic theories. Sometimes, he says, looking at a tree, he sees a log.

By the early 1980s he was documenting the transitions of paper from one state to another. His artworks included stacked reams of paper up to 6 feet tall alongside compressed blocks of paper alongside swollen layers of sheets of paper. It was almost as if the viewer were seeing the "growth" of something called "paper" into something called "book."

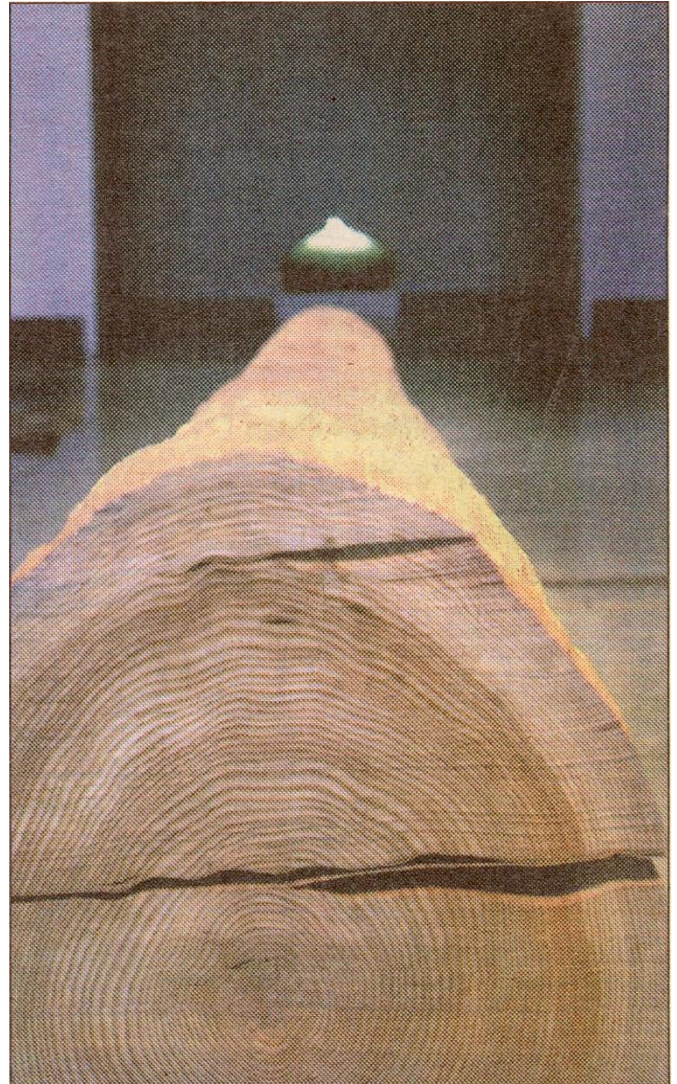
Themes of growth, layering and accumulation mix in Kadonaga's work with their flip sides: erosion, delamination, destruction.

Kadonaga will turn logs into stacked wooden sheets, bury charred logs in ash or flay the ends of bamboo poles into giant brooms. He once used silkworm cocoons in an exhibit, only to have them begin to hatch while they were on display.

Among his recent creations are translucent green mounds of glass that can take 48 hours to pour and weigh nearly a ton.

The monster globs took months to dry and looked like something out of a science fiction movie.

"I try to look at the ordinary materials again,"



*Kadonaga tries to find one method for each material, such as burning and cutting for wood.*

he says, choosing words carefully. "To pay attention, to see what they are."

He says his art may reflect differences in the Japanese and Western ways of looking at art and life. Yes, he wants to let the inner nature of his materials come out, and that might be a very Eastern way of thinking.

"But I didn't intend to be like that," he says. "It happened like that."

The exhibit will continue through Dec. 7. The Schneider, on the campus of Southern Oregon University in Ashland, is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and the first Friday of the month from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. For information, call 552-6245 or visit

[www.sou.edu/sma](http://www.sou.edu/sma).

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