

Blue Vista (1985), 28" x 28".

Space Disk (1985), diameter 38".

Neil Tetkowski

Janet Koplos



My difficulty in writing about Neil Tetkowski has nothing to do with his work specifically. I find it serious, capable, thoughtful, and interesting. He has a surprisingly long work history for an artist his age and a consistent devotion to the development of his art. Nevertheless, I am slightly uneasy in evaluating his work simply because his career has moved so smoothly.

Yet that's nonsense. It's a romantic myth that artists must suffer. Tetkowski simply has known early what he wanted and the maturity to achieve it. I think of him as the heir of Peter Voulkos. His large platter forms—he calls them disks—have a superficial similarity to Voulkos's plate series. And Tetkowski, like Voulkos, has pushed the limits of one-person clay manipulation in a way that seems to measure personal strength. It's macho. But however much Tetkowski's clay handling seems modeled on the mudslinging master, his objects have never approached slavish imitation. Tetkowski's are softer, more fluid and moist in their contours. He treats the object with individual integrity rather than attacking it. Tetkowski has done two major series: disks and volcanoes. Both are about landscape and issues of form. A number of the plates have worked and reworked the relationship between rim and basin, and some of his strongest forms are those in which the distinction between inside and edge in some way collapses. In one striking volcano, a single spiraling line starts from a notch on the base edge and creeps nearly to the mouth, but stops incomplete. This combination of earth/mass and drawn line is again related to Voulkos's approach, but is differentiated by Tetkowski's restraint and tendency toward sinuous rather than slashed line.

In his early work, Tetkowski used a palette of dry-earth colors, identified in America with the Southwest, but taken in his case from the earth of Italy, where he once lived. He is now exploring fantastic colors suggesting natural wonders or mineral and metallic marvels. He creates complicated planar relationships by treating the rims with solid colors, often dark, while the insides turn pink and white—arid in a delicate, tentative way—with darkness looming underneath, suggesting unrevealed depths. Slicing into those depths are drawn lines that force our attention to the surface again. Color is one of the challenges implicit in Tetkowski's new work: what does it do to the relationships of outside and inside? Is there meaning to the color itself? Unfortunately, the answer to the latter question seems to be no.

Another challenge in Tetkowski's work is implicit in his break from the radial, wheel format. He shows two slabs that have evolved from disk-and-rim into less circular shapes, broken and fragmentary. This is a promising direction: it opens up the work, making it less predictable without giving up the advantages of clay's responsiveness and dimension. I am hopeful for this development because Tetkowski's work so far, for all its skill, has concentrated on synthesis rather than invention. One glimpses here the forms of Robert Turner and Richard DeVore as well as Voulkos. The combination is elegantly realized, yet not his own—it has not moved beyond those precedents. I hope he proves me wrong by developing a passion in his work to give an edge to the nonchalant skillfulness and by developing an expressive form that, regardless of acknowledged influences, could only be his.

Neil Tetkowski's work was seen recently at Objects Gallery, Chicago, Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, and at Akasaka Green Gallery, Tokyo.