



Neil Tetkowski with the still-moist "Common Ground World Mandala," which was formed from a mixture of clay and sand from the 188 member states of the United Nations; dry samples are displayed in the line of bottles along the window.

Common Ground WORLD MANDALA

by Robert C. Morgan

A symbol of unity and world harmony, the "Common Ground World Mandala" was formed last April at the United Nations headquarters in the General Assembly Visitor's Lobby from a special blend of clay and sand contributed by all 188 member states. New York artist Neil Tetkowski was assisted in the mandala's creation by representatives from each of these coun-

tries, in that each representative placed a fired tile from her or his country into the soft world-clay blend. The completed sculpture will be exhibited at the United Nations in 2001.—Ed.

Walking into Neil Tetkowski's studio on West 19th Street one morning last winter, I saw packages of clay from places

like Afghanistan, Barbados, Gambia, Madagascar, Zambia and various island nations in the Caribbean. Of course, the list goes on. Just seeing the shapes of these packages of clay, with their colorful stamps, all in one place, was a kind of thrill. Yet I kept asking myself, "Why is he building this 'World Mandala'? What is the motivation?"

The mandala is a universal symbol that pervades human culture. It has been known in many forms and variations throughout the history of humankind. The mandala has appeared in the form of a spiral vortex weaving through constellations, a sun disk etched in rock by Mesopotamians, a Hellenic labyrinth, a Buddhist *thangka*. The mandala has evolved as a symbol of spiritual growth. It has been read over eons of time as a symbol of timelessness, as a representation of individual human desire to secure a sense of wholeness in relation to the world at large.

The mandala is a fusion of nature and culture, an overlay of the past, present and future, a sign of transcendent value and spiritual vision in the material world. It is a phenomenon that

is both ancient and contemporary, a conjugation of mind and body. According to Tetkowski, "The mandala is a human creation of regeneration, healing and reconciliation, a visual construction for contemplation that may lead to a heightened state of awareness."

He believes that the mandala functions as a symbol of world harmony, that as a vehicle of spiritual meaning, it has the potential to bring us into an ever-evolving cosmos of intersubjective thinking and feeling. Put more simply, human beings need symbols of well-being in order to foster a heightened sense of kinship with one another.

Many of the artist's earlier clay disks, constructed in the 1980s and 1990s, were also mandalas—flattened vessels impressed with handprints, Hebrew let-

ters and machine parts, or pierced with spikes, nuts, bolts, bullets or other metal artifacts. These low-lying vessels, as well as occasional "smoke stack" vessels, were all made in reference to the mandala.

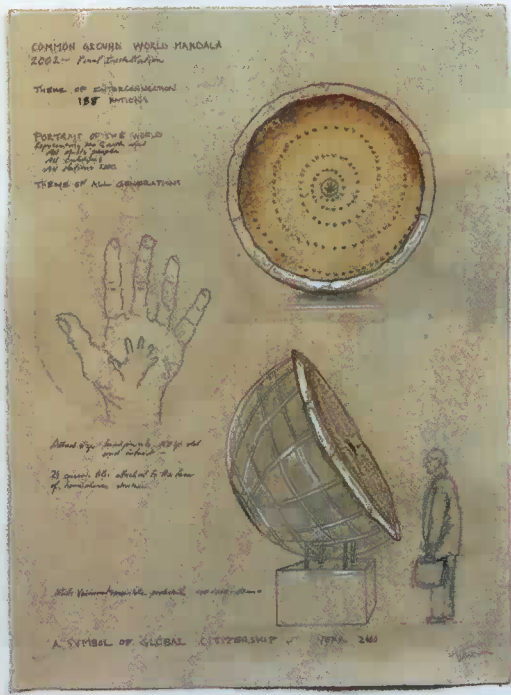
Tetkowski wanted to take the mandala concept he had been using in his works and transform it into something more public, to share an awareness about what it means to be a citizen living on this planet. He approached the United Nations with a proposal to build a sculpture entitled "The Wheel of Life: Common Ground World Mandala." After much persistence, he was directed to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Upon explaining his intentions, both aesthetic and pragmatic, he finally received a letter of endorsement from



Clay was collected at Ngorogoro Crater by children from Olarobi, Tanzania.



Janlav Teslmonkhoo digging clay in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.



Conceived as a symbol of unity and world harmony, the "Common Ground World Mandala" features an infant's handprint inside that of a 100-year-old woman at the center; spiraling outward are 188 embedded tiles.



Each fired tile was placed in the moist clay by a representative from the participating nation; here, Sandar Hla positions the tile from Myanmar as Tetkowsky continues to shape the spiral.



The contributed clays were mixed by Standard Ceramics of Pittsburgh, then formed by hand and foot into a large disk in the General Assembly Visitor's Lobby at the United Nations headquarters in New York City.



"Three Generations: Tetkowski Family Mandala," 38 inches in diameter, stoneware, 1994, by Neil Tetkowski, New York City.

the UN Under Secretary General Nitin Desai. It was at this point that Tetkowski began making contacts with people from 188 countries (the full membership of the United Nations) in order to obtain samples of clay.

The performative aspect of "Common Ground" is multifold: first, there was the "selling" of the concept to the UN and to potential benefactors; second, the soliciting and gathering of clays from 188 countries; third, the mixing of the clay by Standard Ceramics of Pittsburgh; and fourth, the forming of the "World Mandala" at the UN headquarters in April 2000. The actual presentation of the completed object will not occur until January.

What is lacking in the world today is a real sense of our physicality. We are

constantly bombarded by information, digital images galore, advertising and mindless spectacles. The images appear as quickly as they disappear. We no longer have a sense that anything stays around for very long. There is an absence of stability in the world—not just political or economic stability, but a stability of mind, heart, community, and finally a sense of culture, a transculture that we share. This is the point that I believe Neil Tetkowski is striving to make. We need stability. We need to recognize the stability of the Earth, that we are all members of this tiny planet in the infinite spiral nebulae.

Metaphorically and spiritually, we are all a part of the great mandala—a lesson gleaned from the Diamond Sutra in Mahayana Buddhism. Yet at the same

time, we are all a part of this material world. We all belong together, yet we are constantly trying to separate, to pull apart from one another. The physical act of gathering together, and sending the clay, the real (not the virtual) dissemination of clay, the building of the mandala, the placing of the fired pieces into the soft clay—all these physical acts are important. They are necessary to reinforce the sense that we are alive. We are not just digitized images; we are alive in the world and part of the world, part of the physical substance of the "World Mandala."

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