

A MID-CAREER RETROSPECTIVE OF  
NEIL TETKOWSKI



RETHINKING MYTHOS

CANADIAN CLAY AND GLASS GALLERY



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NEIL TETKOWSKI  
RETHINKING MYTHOS

Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery  
Waterloo, Ontario



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Front cover: *Tracks through Charybdis*, 1990. Ceramic, 3 x 36 in. diameter  
Frontispiece: *Earth Pool*, Earthen River Series, 1998. Ceramic, metal, 27 x 24 x 4 in.

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## Director's Foreword

*Rethinking Mythos: A Mid-career Retrospective of Neil Tetkowski*, curated by Christian Bernard Singer, is an ambitious and important exhibition for the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery. There are few artists who have created bodies of work of the scale, scope, and resonance that Neil Tetkowski has produced over the past few decades. We are proud to share this exhibition—made possible by a grant from the Consulate General of the United States in Toronto, Canada—with our community.

I would like to thank Neil for his enthusiasm and generosity throughout the process of planning and realizing this exhibition. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge and thank Christian Bernard Singer for his work with Neil during the past three years, which resulted in this extraordinary show.

There are a number of key contributors who must also be thanked. Our museum curator, Sheila McMath, worked with Neil Tetkowski during the later stages of planning to resolve practical and logistical issues related to the final manifestation of the exhibition. She worked to honour the vision put in place by Christian Bernard Singer to celebrate Neil's impressive career.

The installation team, led by Sandy Gordon, worked tirelessly to mount this exhibition in the gallery's unique architectural space.

The writers Glen R. Brown, Robert C. Morgan, Sheila McMath, and Christian Bernard Singer and the graphic designer Paul Klonowski contributed to this substantial and visually stunning catalogue made possible by a generous donation from Diana Reitberger.

In closing, let me take this opportunity to thank the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the City of Waterloo, and the many individuals, corporations, and foundations without whose support exhibitions such as this would not be possible.

William D. Poole  
Executive Director  
Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery



**Talon**, 1992. Ceramic, glass, metal, 48 x 26 x 8 in.

# RETHINKING MYTHOS: A MID-CAREER RETROSPECTIVE OF NEIL TETKOWSKI

Christian Bernard Singer

*Rethinking Mythos*, organized by the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, surveys the work of the American artist Neil Tetkowski created over nearly forty years and represents a significant milestone of artistic accomplishment. Although it demonstrates Tetkowski's evolution as an artist, the exhibition also makes important resonating connections between the work and the man.

Through all four spaces of the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, the exhibition initiates relationships between works created during various periods of the artist's career as it reveals his material and conceptual progression. Although the exhibition points to the artist's roots in creating circular works and platters that have been altered, broken, and reassembled in endless sculptural variations, it also includes two large-scale sculptures and a photo installation that are fully at home within the architectonic features of the gallery's spaces.

At the heart of the exhibition is the artist's poetic use of clay, which directly references the natural environment while implying a sense of world collectiveness and belonging. Clay comes directly from the earth, and its relationship to the cyclical nature of life and death is what connects all living beings to the planet and to each other. Living is a stage of dying, and dying is just another stage of living. There is beauty and meaning in both.

The earliest work in the exhibition, *Vortical Vessel* (1976), signals some of the elements still found in the artist's oeuvre today. The containment of the vessel has been intercepted by a jagged hole that pokes through the lower side. A gestural line traverses in a semicircle from the underside of the rim to the middle inner side, while another shorter line starts from the top of the rim, flattening and joining it with the work's inner space. The nearly opposite rim has been gouged, and the eye is drawn inside the vessel. This gives rise to a giddy vertigo as one is drawn into a macrocosmic view of the universe or a magical landscape. Here the vessel is no longer a bowl; it is a "vessel" that allows the viewer to embark on a personal voyage.



Above: ***Upside Bowl***, 1982. Ceramic, 4 x 17 in. diameter

Below: ***Earthenware Vessel***, 1981. Ceramic, 3 x 20 in. diameter



**Galaxy Series**, 1991. Ceramic, 3 x 32 in. diameter. Collection of the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery

In this and subsequent works, we witness the unifying element of the disc, both literally and figuratively. Tetkowski's discs, circles, spirals, and cones may evoke geologic transformations of the planet, mirror our ephemeral natures and shared histories, or open mandalic portals to inner and cosmic consciousness. This is particularly evident in his platter-shaped painterly wall works, some of which measure four feet in diameter. Here the rim not only frames the visual field but it also breaks into the composition in such a way that it becomes holistically integral to the action within the work. In Tetkowski's *Beyond Scylla* (1990) and *Galaxy Series* (1991), he incises and gouges the clay with spontaneous yet gestural lines that are as sure and fluid as the artistry of a master Chinese or Japanese calligrapher. He then sprays the work with coloured terra-sigillata slips, rendered like a natural occurrence, variegated during firing in a low-fire salt kiln.







**Spiked Mandala Series #3**, 2001. Ceramic, metal, 4 x 20 in. diameter

In a work entitled *11 Spikes* (1999) he revisits his American Iron and Steel series of large discs about the failed promises and environmental consequences of industrialization, a ten-year project that has since become ongoing. In this series, the clay has been fired together with old rusty chains, gears, and rail spikes that the artist found along the train tracks of an old steel mill that was once a booming concern in his home town of Buffalo. However, *11 Spikes* seems to tell a new story, a story that imparts the poignancy of the survivor. The spikes are jabbed into the rim and well of the disc, producing bulging welts that are rendered even more painful and fresh-looking in their burned and blackened state. Like the scorched-earth policies of advancing and retreating armies, industry is also a sort of take-no-prisoners machine in its greedy quest for self-advancement, usually at the expense of nature. Yet there is a sense of transcendent transition as if new life, or a new state of being, is on its way.





***Red Arizona Mythos***, 2012. Ceramic, 24 x 12 x 2 in.



***Dhow Drifter***, 2012. Ceramic, 15 x 18 x 12 in.

Although the vernacular of the disc form remains evident in most of his works, Tetkowsky's explorations include opening and extending the rim outward at one end or morphing two or three discs together. These works resemble bodies of land and water, sometimes dejectedly polluted as in the *Earthen River* series (1994–2003), or abstractedly gestural as in his stunningly evocative aerial view of the American Southwest in *Red Arizona Mythos* (2012). Some, such as *Chocolate Mythos I* and *II* (2006), resemble fragmented friezes of ancient times in which we are given only a part of the narrative and are invited to find our own meaning based on our own personal dictionary of experiences.

In a number of works, Tetkowsky uses only the rim, which is sectioned and reconstructed in gestural sculptures and wall works that evoke ambiguous yet expanding mythical architectures,



***White Contour I***, 2014. Ceramic, 33 x 17 x 13 in.





**White Contour II**, 2014. Ceramic, 31 x 18 x 11 in.





**Constructed Spiral**, 2012. Ceramic, 5 x 19 in. diameter

such as *Skyline* (1988) and *Dhow Drifter* (2012), or geologic manifestations, as in *Terra Rig* (2012). And the skeletal compositions, *White Contour I* and *II* (2014), which seem alive as if in perpetual growth, oscillate between architectural structure and corporeal being. Alternatively, the universal human quest for connections to something other than earth-bound experience is explored in the anthropomorphically spirit-like bird *Earthen Wings* (2012). Meanwhile, *Constructed Spiral* (2012) seems to close in on itself, suggesting that the cyclical nature of life, death, transcendence, and transformation, whether animal or planetary, begins and ends at some elusively mysterious core.

Tetkowsky's work reminds us that humans and the environment are intrinsically intertwined and interconnected. Though we have an innate need to create, discover, invent, and evolve, our activities now threaten our very survival. In response to environmental concerns, which have since become a global crisis, Tetkowsky embarked in 1998 on a massive project entitled



**Cable and Chain**, American Iron and Steel Series, 1986. Ceramic, metal, 39 x 36 x 5 in.





**Installation 188**, in 2010 at the HPGRP Gallery, New York City

the *Common Ground World Project*. This led to the creation of *Installation 188*, a sculpture measuring 24 feet long with 188 numbered glass bottles on an aluminium pedestal containing clay samples from each of the 188 member nations of the United Nations. The poignant image of such diverse colours and textures, which represents the social and cultural diversity of their respective populations, serves as a fascinating contrast with the specimen-like quality of the samples encased in bottles as if they were in a Victorian-era cabinet of curiosities.

In a companion work, the *World Mandala Monument*, a large ceramic disc rests on an aluminum skeletal structure of a half-sphere, tilted to one side much like a terrestrial globe. For the disc, Tetkowski combined all the various clays and sands to create a one-world clay body. At the centre of the disc is the handprint of a centenarian woman, and within that impression is the handprint of a millennial baby. The handprint is a recurring theme in Tetkowski's work—a voluntary and powerful action that represents the universally understood evidence of a person's life forever preserved in clay. From the handprints spirals outward an elevated line into which are embedded numbered and fired clay samples from each of the 188 countries. In this work, Tetkowski's mandala invites us to contemplate being from and belonging





Clockwise: **Cuban School Children 5**, **Cuban School Children 2**, **Cuban School Children 3**, **Cuban School Children 4**, 2005. Digital photography, 25 x 21 in. each



***Breaking Bread, Cuban/American***, 2006. Cuban and American clay, fabric, metal, 5 x 15 x 15 in.

to a transcendently universal perspective from which we can share in our potential to connect. Both of these works poignantly demonstrate that even in the beauty of our diversity, we are all united by a common desire and inherent right to sustain and care for ourselves and those we love.

In 2005 Tetkowski traveled to Cuba to participate as an artist in residence at the Encuentro Terracotta in Santiago de Cuba. Calling it a “riveting and dynamic” experience, he was also moved by the economic hardships caused by the American embargo against Cuba. Resting on a pedestal, in the centre of the Tower Gallery is *Breaking Bread, Cuban/American* (2006). Here a ceramic slice of bread, marbled by blended clays from Cuba and America, rests unassumingly, partially wrapped in a cloth, on a metal dish on top of a placemat. This installation is accompanied by images of schoolchildren split horizontally so that the upper image shows a seated child holding up a drawing of a dream and the lower image focuses on their footwear, worn and battered Sunday shoes. At first glance, these images seem somewhat bleak and distressing, but on closer inspection, one can see innocence and pride in their eyes, and the separation of the top and lower images suggests a much more hopeful outcome. The installation of these works in such a monolithic glass space that rises up thirty feet reinforces the notion that financial imperialism is always suffered upon those most vulnerable.



**Manhattan**, 1993. Ceramic, 55 x 17 x 2 ½ in.



**September 11, 2001**, 2001. Digital photography

In the Bierstock Gallery, an intimate circular concrete space that evokes a sanctuary or sacred space, is a photo-projection installation. When the attacks took place on September 11, 2001, Tetkowski made his way to downtown New York City and started documenting the scene, capturing incredible images of people walking toward safer ground, looking back at the burning towers, talking on the phone, knowing that this was a cataclysmic event but too stunned to react. Physically speaking, 9/11 happened to New Yorkers and the rest of America, but emotionally and psychically it happened to the entire civilized world. Interestingly, the images are projected down onto a large aluminium disc. Although the disc may make obvious associations to the planet, it also suggests a sense of distance from these events as we watch them in a quiet space, as if the narrative presented were a sort of dream.

Throughout his work, Tetkowski uses archetypal references, such as the circle, the spiral, and the handprint in a way that creates multiple possible entries into the work. Moreover, his chosen material—clay—becomes the perfect vehicle to advocate for a more harmonious relationship with the natural world by highlighting this fundamental life-giving element—earth.

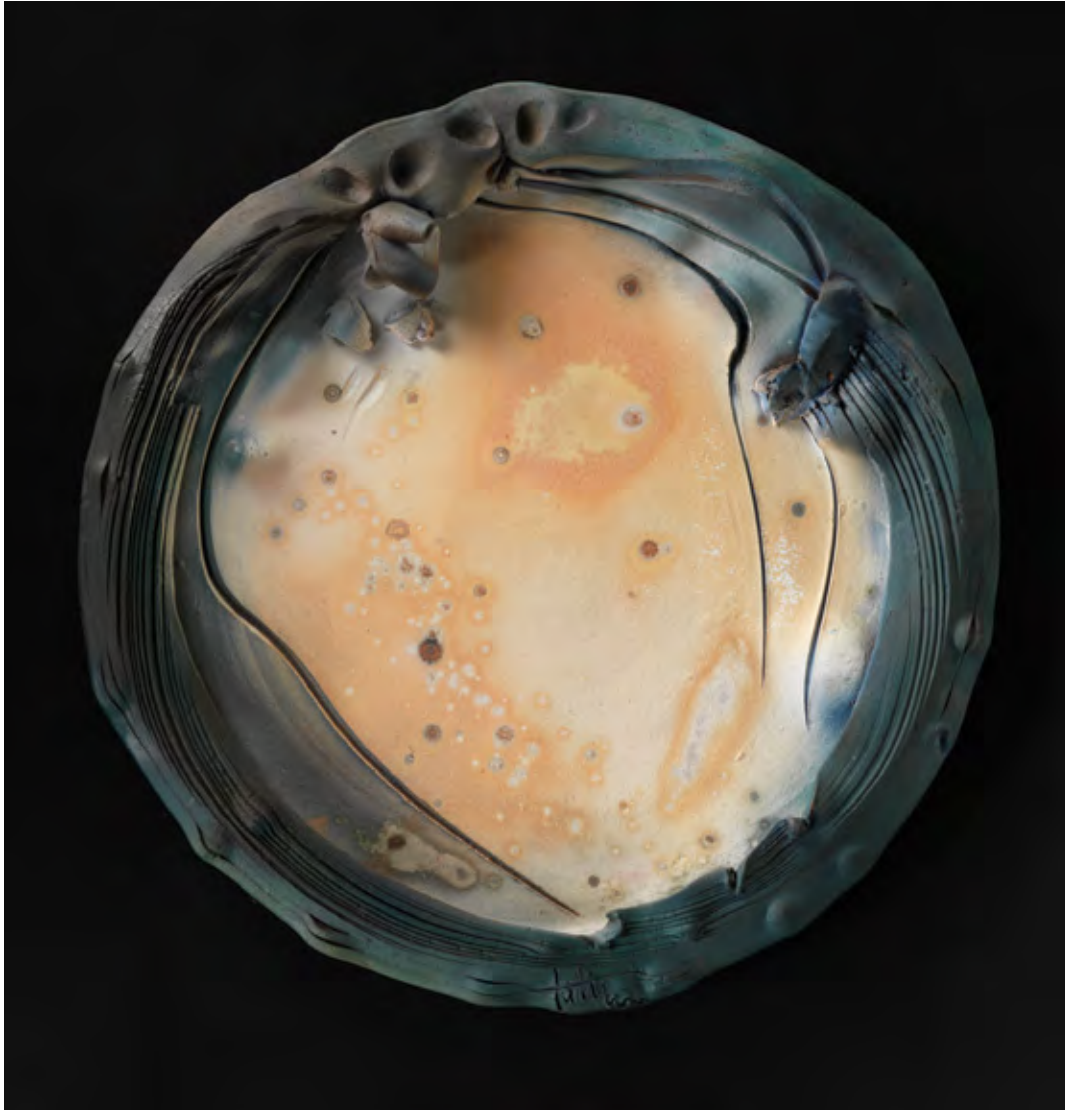




Above: **Arizona Mound**, 2012. Ceramic, 5 x 13 in. diameter

Below: **Black Arizona Volcano**, 2012. Ceramic, 8 x 13 in. diameter





***Beyond Scylla***, 1990. Ceramic, 3 x 30 in. diameter

Tetkowsky's earlier works reflect a love and concern for the environment, but his later works raise these concerns to a global perspective, showing both the causal effects of human activity on the planet and also how these, in turn, affect the world's most vulnerable. Ultimately, Tetkowsky's messages about our relationships as a species to the planet and each other are universal, transcending all social and racial boundaries. Yet we enter willingly into these conversations, because, despite his dire warnings, these works are full of beauty and hope, inspiring our collective ability to create meaningful change.



# NEIL TETKOWSKI: MARKING THE UNIVERSAL

Glen R. Brown

Mark-making is always to some degree assertive, but the intrusive acts of embedding, impressing, and incising add literal and figurative dimensions to the assertion. If nothing else, these means suggest the force of conviction. Fingerprints in a vapor of breath on a mirror epitomize fleeting influence, but the Code of Hammurabi, chiseled into an ancient stele of diorite, still imperiously demands the obedience of the ages by virtue of its incisiveness. For Neil Tetkowski, an incision, whether a ragged cut across a pristine surface of clay or the slashing of a tool through a slather of buttery slip, is a statement for eternity. Ceramics, after all, have preserved the evidence of human will for almost thirty millennia—a span that dwarfs Tetkowski's own career of thirty-five years but at the same time grounds its assertions in the surety of a tested bedrock, a medium that comes as close as any in the human repertoire to constituting a universal ground for expression. Universality is clearly key to Tetkowski's aspirations, but so too is the specificity of personal affirmation that clay, by virtue of its plasticity under the pressure of the human hand, has afforded across history.

It is largely through the confluence of three factors—the universal, the personal, and the historical—that Tetkowski's art has formed its enduring bonds with clay and developed its characteristic openness to interpretation from the diverse perspectives of a collective symbolism, an individual struggle for self-actualization, and a medium-specific history. To varying degrees, all three of these acknowledge motives that Tetkowski's art shares with the Abstract Expressionist movement of the mid-twentieth century. Since the late 1980s, when he encountered psychoanalyst Carl Jung's classic volume *Man and His Symbols*, Tetkowski's work has embraced the concept of archetypal symbolism that once fired the imagination of such emissaries of the unconscious as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky. Like these New York artists, who acquired the epithet Action Painters, Tetkowski has employed a vigorous and visceral working method as a bridge between the universal symbolism of the unconscious and the personal need for self-assertion against the backdrop of a broader humanity. His method, one that treats the traces of hands-on





***Open Mandala With Iron Spike***, 2004. Ceramic and metal, 37 x 34 x 5 in.

interaction with clay as tendentious signifiers, could be compared to the physical engagement of the medium in the work of famed ceramic expressionist Peter Voulkos, but Tetkowsky also promotes the ability of his disc-shaped sculptures to serve as portals for the imagination, windows onto an illusory space in which the mind is free to contemplate the infinite.

The degree to which sensitivity to universal symbolism, articulation of personal identity, and acknowledgment of the history of clay as a medium generates an interpretative dynamic around Tetkowsky's art is most evident when one considers not individual pieces but rather certain forms that recur throughout his work as a whole. Most prominent among these is the circle, which has appeared both vertically and horizontally and on varying scales, attaining in its most exuberant manifestation in the *World Mandala Monument* a diameter of more than two meters. Whether occurring singly, in a configuration of concentric rings, or even open-endedly as a spiral, the circle is an ancient symbol that Tetkowsky values for its



***Iced Undertow***, 2008. Porcelain, 40 x 51 x 2 in.

archetypal character. Primal and ubiquitous, it worked its way naturally into the cosmologies of early peoples around the globe, acquiring its most prominent mystical associations in the mandala of Hinduism and Buddhism. Although reluctant to reduce his intuitive relationship with the archetypal circle to the specificity of words, Tetkowsky implicitly acknowledges the circle's power of attraction as more than a matter of aesthetics. He invites the viewer, by embodying the circle in clay that conjures the enduring earth, to reflect on the infinitude of time and to connect in thought with the spiritual life of ancient peoples who inscribed mystical circles in petroglyphs in the Pyrenees, recounted the myth of the spiraling Chakravayuha in the battle of Kurukshetra, and raised towering circles of standing stones on Salisbury Plain.

Occurring as a form in nature—in the pupil and iris of the eye and in the luminous perfection of a full moon—the circle is connected to the cosmos in another fundamental, if less obvious, way. The visual scope of a human being, turned 360 degrees, encompasses the entire





Above: ***Diane's Meditation***, 1982. Ceramic, 4 x 11 in. diameter  
 Middle: ***Red Mesa Vessel***, 1982. Ceramic, 5 x 17 in. diameter  
 Below: ***Indigenous Bowl***, 1982. Ceramic, 4 x 11 in. diameter  
 Opposite: ***Earth Meditation***, 1982. Ceramic, 4 x 26 in. diameter





***Blackened Mythos***, 2012. Ceramic, 17 x 24 x 2 ½ in.

horizon and the sky above it. Within this calibrated hemisphere, the motion of the heavenly bodies traces the passage of time in cycles. To mark these recurring phenomena, the ancient Peruvian observatory at Chankillo, the prehistoric cromlech at Stonehenge, and the so-called medicine wheels of rock rings and spokes found in western North America made the circle of the universe a concrete form on the face of the earth. More important, such circular guides to the changing sky became the means of organizing and uniting the spiritual and practical aspects of daily life, from planting ceremonies to harvest rituals. For Tetkowsky's art, the circle in this capacity as an orienting device is essential, serving in the largest of his concave sculptures as the equivalent of a planetarium, an imaginary space in which to consider motion and actions in the real world. In physical terms, it is a touchstone in his work, a recurring form—like the Inuit cairns erected at intervals across the wide-open spaces of the Canada's northern territories—that has established continuity between the sculptures of his early career and those of the present. In conceptual terms, the circle has provided a means of connecting the successful outcomes of artistic struggle and the philosophical issues inherent in the problem of personal identity. "The artwork," Tetkowsky asserts, "is really an expression of my finding a sense of dimension and orientation in this very incredible space we occupy in life."<sup>1</sup>



*Falling Mythos*, 2012. Ceramic, 25 x 17 x 2 in.





***Mesa Tech Volcano***, 2012. Ceramic, cell phone, 7 x 17 in. diameter

In addition to its archetypal value and its importance as a symbol of personal orientation and self-affirmation, the circle has obvious connections to the techniques and forms of the world tradition of ceramics. In his early career Tetkowsky was trained to throw on the wheel, producing bowls in the circular shape that results naturally from the spinning motion. This shape, by far the most common for functional vessels across history, has technical origins that predate the invention of the potter's wheel by thousands of years. The pinch pot, raised by the pressure of the thumb and forefinger of one hand while shaped in the cupped palm of the other, emerges naturally rounded, whereas the coil or fillet-constructed vessel—which could in theory result in any number of more angular vessel shapes, from cubic to polyhedral—is almost always spherical. Though Tetkowsky is not a potter, his fidelity to rounded form, which in his work most often suggests a platter with a broad, inwardly folded lip, makes an obvious connection to the history of use of his medium. Clay may be a primal substance in which the energies of a universal mythos seem to flow most readily, but he is equally intrigued by its nature as a part of the Earth that is subject to human ingenuity.



Detail: *Mesa Tech Volcano*

That ingenuity is referenced and celebrated by Tetkowsky through his insertion into clay of such objects as gears or railroad spikes, suggestive of the steam locomotion that facilitated the movement of goods essential to the spread of the Industrial Revolution, and computer motherboards and cell phones, which implicitly invoke the digital revolution still transforming the contemporary world. At the same time, another recurring form in Tetkowsky's work—the human hand—indicates that his regard for the transformative powers of ingenuity is to some degree constrained by concerns about alienation and anonymity. Clay is a medium that can be worked directly by the hand without the intervention of tools, but the industrialization of ceramic vessels that began centuries ago in the factories at Jingdezhen and Staffordshire made possible the kind of ceramic dinnerware that today betrays no trace of human touch. Tetkowsky first reflected on this loss as a teenager and has lamented it ever since. Through the handprints and other human signs that interrupt the surfaces of his sculptures in clay, he conveys “a craving to express a non-mass-produced world through an analogue art—that is, not through the machine-made products of a commercial world of 90° angles and perfectly







Above: ***Hovering Vessel***, 1981. Ceramic, 3 x 18 in. diameter. Collection of the Gardiner Museum  
 Middle: ***Railroad Mandala Vessel***, 1991. Ceramic, metal, 3 x 16 in.  
 Below: ***In Half***, 2004. Ceramic, metal, 3 x 14 x 15 in.  
 Opposite: ***Disk of Phones***, 2012. Ceramic, 5 x 29 in. diameter





**Severed Vista**, 1989. Ceramic, 15 x 35 x 3 in.

smooth surfaces. The fingerprints of the potter from ages ago express continuity: the inevitable, universal human need for mark making.”

This need is emphasized frequently in Tetkowsky’s work through imprints of hands other than the artist’s own, as in *Family Portrait*, *Eight Hands*, or the poignant *World Mandala Monument*, in which a deeply furrowed spiral leads inwardly to the impression of a 100-year-old woman’s hand and its tiny companion in the handprint of a newborn baby. In addition to referencing a universal human history, the handprint as a symbol of assertion in Tetkowsky’s work also forms a very specific link to the history of his own existence. Attending grammar school in Siena, Italy, and visiting a score of countries before his tenth birthday, he learned more about the diversity of humanity as a child than many do over the course of their lives, but he also had occasion to consider the psychological and physical factors that have bound humanity together since the dawn of human time. In particular he remembers in the early 1960s visiting Altamira, Spain, where Paleolithic artists created ghostly silhouettes of sprayed pigment around their hands pressed against cave walls. The handprints in his work evoke the bond between these early hunter gatherers and all of their descendants who have since walked the earth, but they also serve as personal reminders of Tetkowsky’s earliest realization that he, too, participated in this bond.



***Eight Hands***, 1999. Ceramic, metal, 46 x 36 x 5 in.

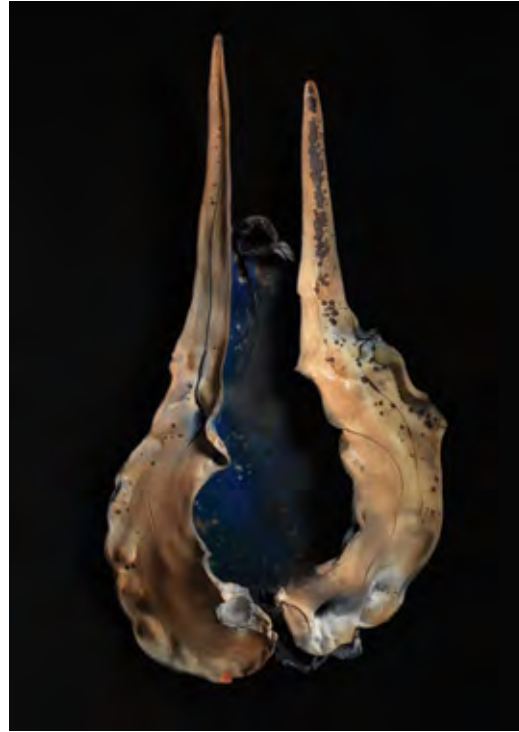
In continuity—in the universal humanity that stretches across time and expresses itself in an eternal language of archetypal symbolism; in the long-lived tradition of ceramics in which the hand has been as constant as clay; in the persistent vision that ties his own earliest works in clay to those of the present—Tetkowsky has found an organizing principle. However, continuity alone has never been a sufficient basis for meaningful art: it reduces to blandness all potential for truly engaging compositions, and it removes art too definitively from the experiences of life.



**Red Stalag**, 1996. Ceramic, 50 x 24 x 5 in.



**Duomo**, 1996. Ceramic, 49 x 27 x 5 in.



**Liquid Cavern**, 1996. Ceramic, 49 x 27 x 7 in.

Compositional continuity must to some degree be countered by discontinuity. For Tetkowsky, the mark, particularly the incision or impression that asserts the self against the unity of the void, is a crucial disrupter of stasis, but another equally important manifestation of discontinuity, one that has recurred in his art with the archetypal gravitas of the circle or the handprint, is the fragment. In his repertoire this generally takes a curving shape, as if it were a sherd of a bowl's shattered well or rim, and it is always presented in groupings suggestive of the remnants of an ancient artifact swept together into fortuitous form.

Through implications of a successive breaking down and building up, Tetkowsky's *Earth Fragments*<sup>2</sup> reflect on the law of conservation of mass, evoking the perpetual disintegration of matter into atomic debris that with time reorganizes itself into new, albeit increasingly less orderly forms. Archetypes of death and rebirth convene easily within these works, which simultaneously express the melancholy of things dismantled and the optimism of new construction. In the context of *Rethinking Mythos*—a retrospective exhibition that is decidedly introspective as well—the *Earth Fragments* take on the added role of analogies to Tetkowsky's own career, both because of the idea of dispersion and reunification of objects that they convey and because they seem to present two separate notions of time simultaneously. The first of these is chronological, inhering in a series of discrete events or artworks bearing connections to different moments in the artist's life; the second is categorical, constituting





**Smokestack Mandala #5**, 1991. Ceramic, metal,  
6 x 6 x 13 in.



**Smokestack Mandala #3**, 1991. Ceramic, metal,  
6 x 6 x 13 in.

an unchanging state, an eternity, to which artworks and ideas can aspire. By orienting his work toward the universal, the unchanging condition of the archetype, Tetkowski ensures for it a sense of eternal presence; at the same time, such physical objects as artworks are made at specific moments in time and must in that sense inevitably become historical markers, fragments of the past, instances of discontinuity against the backdrop of a constant artistic vision. “This exhibition is a fortunate gift” Tetkowski observes. “When I see the older work it feels like my perceptions and my way of internally relating to time have changed, but there is something about these objects that doesn’t change. The works make sense together. It feels like I could have made them all today.”

#### Notes

1. This and all subsequent quotations are from personal communication with the artist on January 30, 2015.
2. Tetkowski’s exhibition of *Earth Fragments* was held at HPGRP Gallery in New York City (November 8–December 1, 2012) and at Renmin University of China, Beijing, in 2013. Works from that exhibition that have been included in *Rethinking Mythos* are *Earthen Wings*, *Surging Conflux*, *Constructed Spiral*, *Terra Rig*, and *Blue T Construct*.



***Car and Lake***, 1986. Ceramic, metal, 5 x 29 in. diameter



*Hour Glass*, 2001. Ceramic, metal, 46 x 29 x 6 in.

# REFORMING EARTH

Sheila McMath

Neil Tetkowski made a declaration early in his career that he was attracted to the raw and sensuous quality of clay and its power to symbolize the earth. He expressed his intention to devote his time to engaging with clay's material processes. Along with defending his commitment to clay, he also simultaneously stated, with an equally decisive tone, that he was not interested in being an "unknown craftsman" making objects for utilitarian use. Instead he intended to make works that would assert his full engagement with the aesthetic and social questions of his time.

Much of Tetkowski's studio practice of the 1980s and early 1990s is imbued with an inherent physicality and performative quality. As viewers, we can imagine that he wrestled with substantial amounts of clay (often more than 200 pounds of clay thrown on a large customized wheel) to create three- to four-foot circles or discs. Viewers witness the disruption of the surface, sometimes with just one or two decisive lines that gouge the object, leaving evidence of the artist's hand. In other works we see that he attacked the surface to severely alter it, impressing and embedding objects (industrial tools and technological implements) into the clay. We sense that physicality and its link to the Abstract Expressionist notion that the artwork is simply evidence of a creative process.

For the purposes of exhibition, many of Tetkowski's early career works are presented vertically so that they take on the language and implied importance of painting. His works are of a scale that they inhabit one's entire field of vision, enveloping the viewer and demanding a response. Like many artists, Tetkowski understands the power of scale and uses it deliberately. These grounding principles (his devotion to clay, his understanding of scale, and his desire to affect viewers on a visceral level) explored in the first twenty-some years of Tetkowski's career, can be re-evaluated in the context of the *Common Ground World Project*.

Beginning in the late nineties and continuing for several years, Neil Tetkowski created the monumental artworks that make up the *Common Ground World Project*. To begin these





***Tracks through Charybdis***, 1990. Ceramic, 3 x 36 in. diameter



The **World Mandala Monument** was made at the United Nations during April of 2000 with participants from every country. **Installation 188** is in the background.

projects, Tetkowski collected clay and samples from all 188 countries that are members of the United Nations. This took a year and a half and culminated in the creation of two major artworks, the *World Mandala Monument* and *Installation 188*. The process of collecting these clay samples from multiple countries required that participants research the clay's location, organize a plan for its extraction, feel it in their hands, and encounter it on a physical level. The moment of reflection before participants sent their samples along to the artist is perhaps the most important aspect of this process. Such a pause holds power to communicate profound meaning to participants despite limitations of language and culture.

The works included in the *Common Ground World Project* are examples of Tetkowski's impressive patience and unwavering belief that people across the globe have a desire to participate in actions that bind us as a people. These artworks are ambitious social experiments requiring careful and nuanced communication that began years before the actual work was created and exhibited.

Throughout the *Common Ground World Project*, Tetkowski maintained a singular, coherent vision for his work while inviting and relying on participation from many others. For Tetkowski this project was a vehicle to begin (and continue) conversations about major world issues that otherwise would be too difficult to tackle. The work resonates as a profound example of art as



***Surging Conflux***, 2012. Ceramic, 17 x 28 x 4 in.

a social practice and a way to integrate art into everyday life. Relationships were forged across the globe through the process of working together toward the realization of this goal.

*Installation 188* is a display of the palette of the clay and sand samples of all 188 countries. It is unique in that it makes use of the visual language of the scientific laboratory. The sealed glass containers, numbered 1 through 188, stretch out over twenty-four feet and display amazing examples of the diversity of the earth—vibrant blue clay from Haiti, rich yellow from Zambia, and gorgeous red from Yemen, to name a few. These clay samples are shown with minimal artistic imposition and manipulation. *Installation 188* is a powerful document of the process of collecting the clay and a restrained, cerebral, and beautiful companion to the *World Mandala Monument*.

The *World Mandala Monument*, a work seven feet in diameter on a steel grid “hemisphere” mounted on a marble base, was first exhibited in 2002. As viewers approach the work, they first take in the whole shape. The viewer’s eye is drawn into the spiral formation and the sacred circle, an image of symbolic power across multiple cultures. A viewer thinks of the thousands of hours of time given by representatives of the 188 nations. In some countries, participants created community events as they extracted the clay (1 kilogram from each country)



**Blue T Construct**, 2012. Ceramic, 17 x 26 x 4 in.

from their homes to donate to the project. In some cases, the shipment of clay represented a month's worth of wages. We think of the symbolic act of creating a "world clay" by mixing these clay bodies together and the implied blending of political ideologies and belief systems.

As I study the circle, my eyes rest for a longer time in the centre of the work, and I feel the grounding force of the two handprints, one of a 100-year-old person and one of an infant. Tetkowsky's simple act of impressing two hands in the centre of his monolithic sculpture takes me back to one of the first images shown to me in an introductory art history class. The handprints in the Lascaux caves of southern France were created over 30,000 years ago, with natural red ochre pigments showing fingertips pointing upward in a hopeful gesture. I remember first seeing this image more than two decades ago and imagining a voice saying to me and to others, simply and emphatically: "I was here, I lived, and this earth was my home for a time."





**World Mandala Monument** at the United Nations in 2002. Ceramic, aluminum, 106 x 88 x 68 in.

# WORLD MANDALA

## NEIL TETKOWSKI'S COMMON GROUND WORLD PROJECT

Robert C. Morgan

Walking into Neil Tetkowski's studio on West 19th Street one morning in January of 2000, I saw packages of clay from places like Afghanistan, Barbados, Gambia, Madagascar, Bhutan, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 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 colourful stamps all in one place was a kind of thrill. The enormous undertaking of bringing all of this clay together became a kind of conceptual act. How did he do it? The evidence was there: the real physical stuff, earthly matter pulled from various geographies, various terrain, and various climates. I reflected on my experience after leaving the studio. The implications were tremendous. 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 disc etched in rock by the Mesopotamians, an 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 Neil 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."

Tetkowski believes that the mandala functions as a symbol of world harmony. As a vehicle of spiritual meaning, the mandala is a symbol with the potential to bring us into an ever-evolving cosmos of intersubjective thinking and feeling. Put more simply, human beings need symbols









**Installation 188** in 2002 at the Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York.

of well-being in order to bring them into a heightened sense of kinship with one another. This is essentially the notion that brought Tetkowsky into an awareness that something could be done with this concept in relation to art. Something could be done to create a large-scale work on a cooperative scale as a functional symbol in today's world.

Many of the artist's earlier clay discs, constructed in the 1980s and '90s, were mandalas — flattened vessels inscribed with marks, such as handprints, Hebrew letters, and machine parts, or pierced with spikes, nuts, bolts, bullets, or other metal artifacts that he would often leave in the clay. These low-lying vessels, as well as occasional “smoke stack” vessels, were all made in reference to the mandala. As a departure from the clay vessel, Tetkowsky did a performance work in 1991, entitled *Ground War*. This public performance had a temporal aspect in which he projected his own physical presence into the work. His direct involvement with the clay process became equally as significant as the finished art object. This crossover relationship between performance and object became a key notion for Tetkowsky as he started to embark on the *Common Ground World Project* several years later.





Detail: *Installation 188*

*Common Ground World Project* began as a concept — an experiment on how the peoples of the world understand the Earth, the planet that we all share. Tetkowsky wanted to take the mandala concept that he had been using in his private works and to transform this concept into something more public—to share an awareness about what it means to be a citizen living on this planet. In order to give his concept credibility, he approached the United Nations with a proposal to build a sculpture entitled *The Wheel of Life: Common Ground World Mandala*. After much persistence, Tetkowsky 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 the UN Under-Secretary-General Nitin Desai. It was at this point that Tetkowsky began making contacts with representatives from 188 countries (the full membership of the United Nations) in order to obtain samples of clay. Through the private donations of fifteen individuals and sponsorship from the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the Ford Foundation, Tetkowsky was able to activate the project.

The performative aspect of *Common Ground* is multifold: first, there was the “selling” of the concept to the UN and to potential benefactors; secondly, the soliciting and the gathering of “world clay” from 188 countries—a monumental task in itself; thirdly, the mixing of the clay by Standard Ceramics of Pittsburgh; and fourth, the celebration of the *World Mandala* at the UN in April 2000 in which Tetkowsky, the Under-Secretary-General, and representatives from 188 countries convened to launch the construction of the *World Mandala* by placing samples of the



**Installation 188** in 2005 at the World Ceramic Biennale, Icheon, Korea

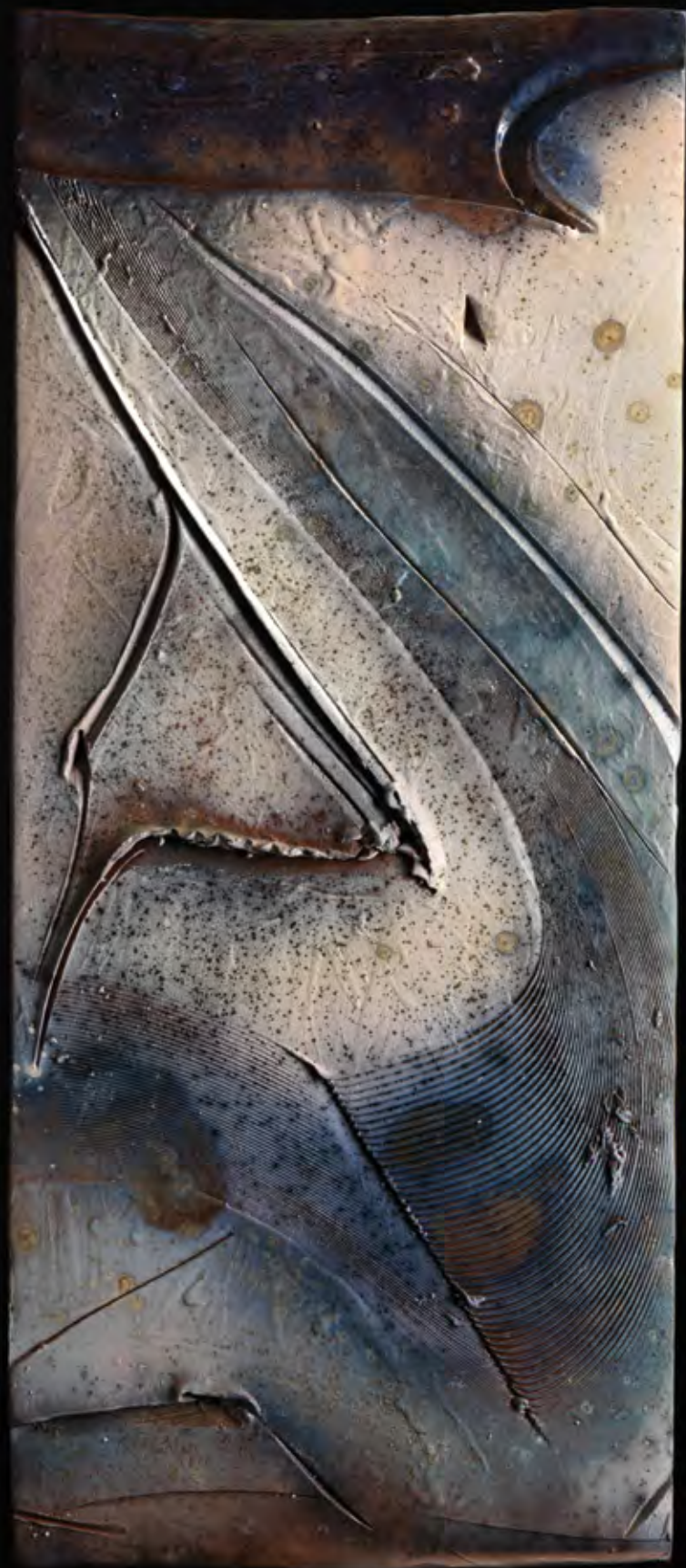
fired clay into the soft disc. The actual finished presentation of the physical object was exhibited at the United Nations in 2002.

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 all share in which we are all participants. This is the point that I believe Neil Tetkowsky 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 of these physical acts are important. They are important and necessary to reinforce the sense that we are alive. We are not just digitized images, but we are alive in the world, and part of the world, part of the physical substance of the Earth; the *World Mandala*.











***Terra Rig***, 2012. Ceramic, 25 x 15 x 13 in.

## THOUGHTS FROM MY JOURNAL

Life is flowing forward with perpetual movement, like moving water, whether it's a trickle or a river or a grand waterfall. Water flows and evaporates, and then it falls to the earth as rain yet again. It recycles the force and the energy. Freezing and thawing, we live one day at a time. But the map of developing instructions, the genetic code, the DNA itself, is always handed off as parents give it to their children. With every birth, the code of life is regenerated and given a new form. The genetic secret is passed on wherever life regenerates. The genetic make-up of the entire living population on Earth today represents the past, the present, and the future. Eventually, individual sources can no longer live on as they lose the ability to maintain their own life—and so the force of life is passed on. Each life by itself, on its own, will quickly become dead. But each life intersects, overlaps, and is intertwined with the moving dynamic of the group of lives. Older ones die, but young ones carry the torch until they too are ready to pass it forward. You may possess the energy of life, you may even pass it on, but you have it for only a limited time. Today that energy is alive all around you, in the trees, in the microbes, in the people you love and don't love. Life is in your face. It looks and acts as if it is free and abundant. One day life lets go, vacating and perhaps regenerating somewhere else. In a logical sequence of expansion, we propagate another generation. What possesses the future completely depends on the present activity of life. The present depends on the past, and the past depends on collective memory and group genetics. In fact, we contain the past within the present. We contain the future within the present, but we cannot contain the present, for it's here—and then it's gone.







**NASA** photo of Grand Island, New York.

I grew up on an island a few miles upstream from Niagara Falls. So my home town is literally surrounded by the Niagara River. The community is embraced by a silent yet forceful presence of water. Islands are isolated in some way from the very thing they are connected to, and so are the people who live there. The Niagara River flows thirty-nine miles north from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The United States is to the east and Canada to the west. Going directly south of where I grew up—yes, south—you come to Ontario. For more than twenty years I've been living in Manhattan. It too is an island, a little smaller than Grand Island.



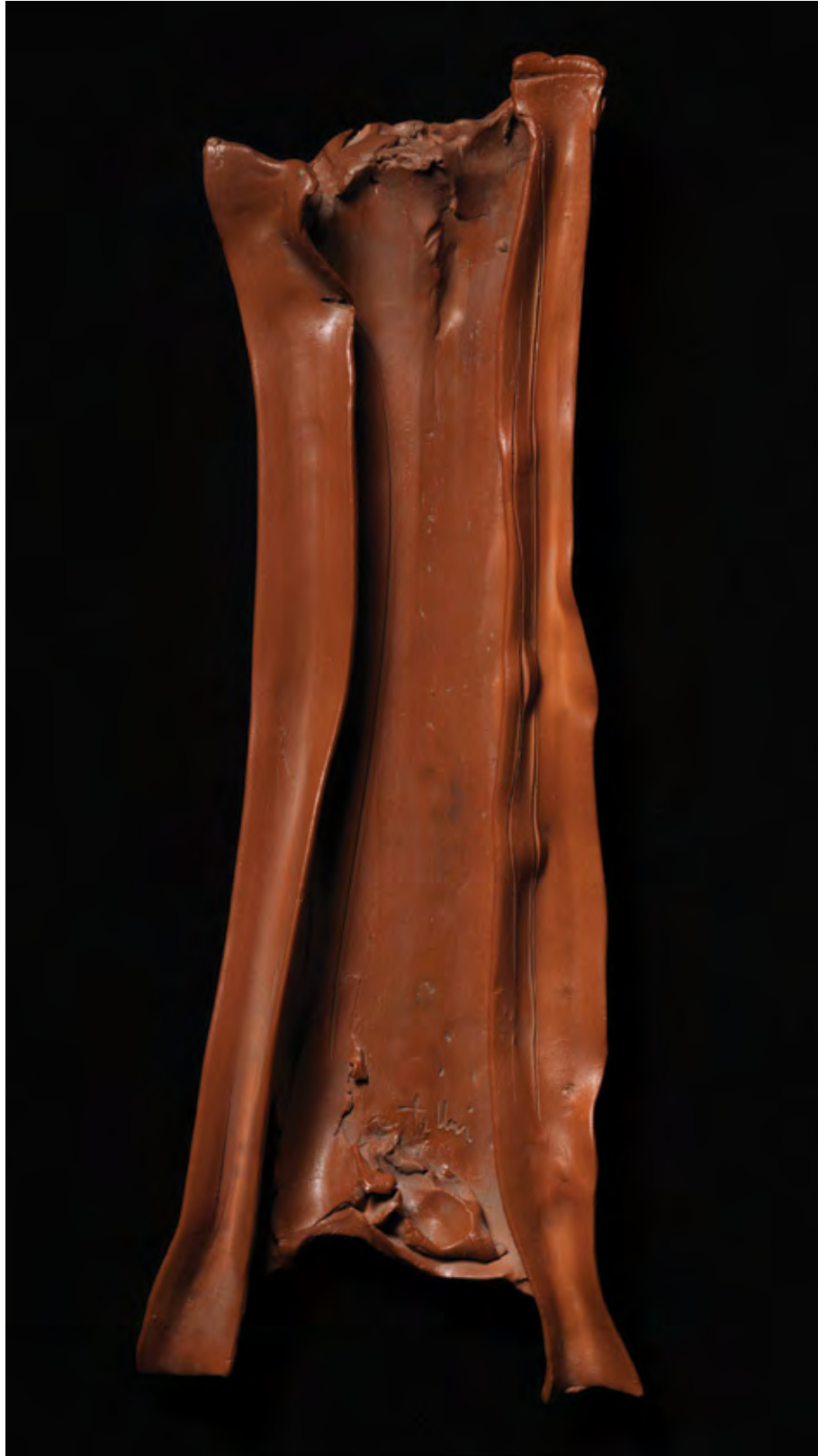


Above: ***Chocolate Mythos II***, 2006. Ceramic, 19 x 24 x 2 ½ in.  
Below: ***Chocolate Mythos I***, 2006. Ceramic, 19 x 21 x 2 ½ in.



***Vortical Vessel***, 1976. Ceramic, 9 x 17 in. diameter

I started making art when I was a kid. It was easy for me, since both of my parents taught art. In the early sixties we lived in Siena, Italy. While I was in elementary school, I had the opportunity to travel around Europe with my father's college students, repeatedly visiting great museums and cultural landmarks. I didn't realize that mine was a special situation until I was in my teens. Around 1970 I had my first adventures with clay. As a young teenager, I was highly motivated and got hooked on making things.



**Pelt**, 1997. Ceramic, 22 x 9 x 2 in.



**Orange Funnel**, 2010. Porcelain, 10 x 11 in. diameter

The artworks in this show are like islands, isolated but connected to something greater. The forces of nature are evident as well—fire, earth, air, and water. These are the forces that define the memory of the material. It's no joke that my hands have worked the earth of every country in the world. So when I form a piece of clay, to me it's the Earth, and I'm "re-forming the world." The Earth is literally and metaphorically transformed. Although the art doesn't say everything, I can think anything. It is a free moment when I create.





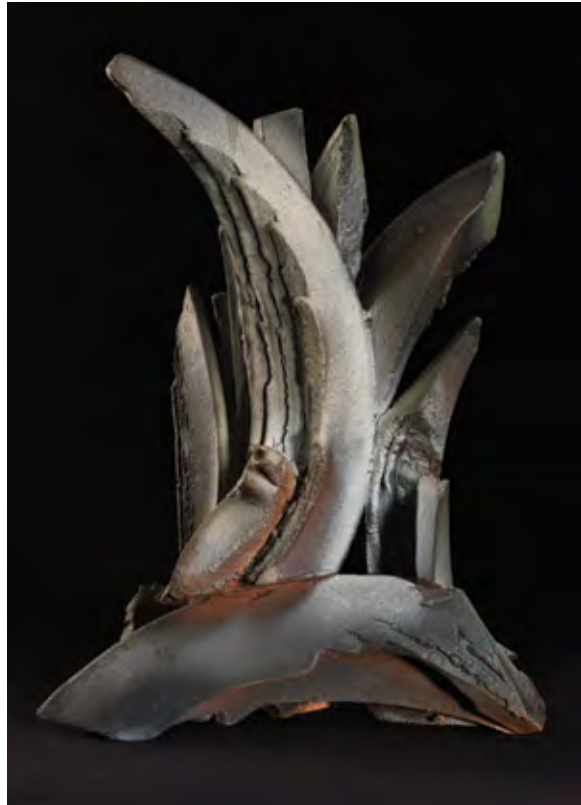


**Machine Shop**, 1984. Ceramic, metal, 23 x 23 ½ x 4 in.

My favorite museum in New York is the Metropolitan. It is so close to where I live that I can walk there when I need a lift. The genius and potential of humanity are celebrated in this house of treasures. At the Met, curators still hold traditional values of excellence and scholarship. I see a lot of clay there, from all over the world. Whenever I leave the Met, I feel as if I've been to a yoga class, centred and renewed. Some people feel like that when they do their religion. I create my own mythos through my art. It is the prism that defines my world.







Two views: ***Skyline***, 1988. Ceramic, 18 x 13 x 6 in.

Today when we talk about the environment, we are typically referring to the ecosystem that sustains life as we know it. The greater Environment is far larger and goes on for infinity. It includes a speck of dust that we know as planet Earth. We humans could blow ourselves up, the Sun could go dark, and most of creation wouldn't even notice we were missing. In terms of my art, I think of clay as a metaphor of the Earth. This is important because the Earth is the environment that sustains my life and yours. More specifically, the disc form, or mandala, becomes an environmental receptacle, a place that contains—perhaps contaminated at the expense of human, animal, and plant life. The overall visual impact might be beauty in the midst of this violation of life energy. Yet the natural and the artificial are presented holistically, for I see humanity and the environment as a single system.







**Niagara Gorge Project:** Shared by Canada and the United States, all of the water from Niagara Falls rushes through this narrow part of the gorge between Devil's Hole and Whirlpool Park. Digital photography by Linda Gellman, 2014.

Borders and nations are all about people slicing and dicing the globe—kind of ridiculous in a way, but it's been an essential mechanism for human civilization to evolve, destroying itself and rebuilding and doing it again, and yet again. Civilization breaks down, the borders change, the river goes dry, the people die, and big armies come in. The politics change, and regeneration starts all over again. So borders reflect the way people organize collectively, the way they have settled their differences, the way power controls resources. The Niagara River is only a border when you think about it that way. Actually, it unites two countries that share a common ecosystem, the Great Lakes.





**Light Volcano**, 2010. Porcelain, 11 x 10 in. diameter

Like layers of sediment, old stories will be covered by new ones, hiding the old and confirming what's new. I see a car commercial on television; it supports a dominant myth of economy and ecology. In earlier times, there were different stories that were repeated over and over. Ancient myths supported ancient truths that eventually became irrelevant.







**Family Portrait**, 1994. Ceramic, 4 x 38 in. diameter

*Family Portrait* is a snapshot of three generations, representing a moment in time. At the bottom centre is my own handprint. I have two older sisters, whose handprints are straight above my own. To the left and right are my parents' handprints. Along with the rest of us, on April 25, 1994, each of their six grandchildren made a handprint and squeezed the rim of the soft fresh clay disc, making our mark in time.

## Biography

Born in 1955, Neil Tetkowski spent his early years in Siena, Italy, where he attended grammar school for several years in the early 1960s. Both parents were in the arts and this provided an early foundation for what would become a lifetime passion for creativity, education, and a fascination with diverse cultures of the world. Before his tenth birthday, Tetkowski had crossed the Atlantic Ocean three times by ship and had visited museums and cultural landmarks in more than twenty countries. His material of choice comes directly from the Earth, and most often he uses clay, which he believes is the perfect medium to express his relationship to the natural environment. Since 1980 Tetkowski has exhibited his artwork in galleries and museums. He has a special interest in Asian culture and has had three solo exhibitions in Tokyo; most recently he had a major solo show in Beijing. Some of Tetkowski's projects have evolved into cultural, ecological, and geopolitical exploration. Fifteen years ago, he built a sculpture at the United Nations using a blend of earth materials from every member nation. Tetkowski has received numerous awards, including a Ford Foundation grant. His artwork is widely published and is represented in the permanent collections of fifty museums, including the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Museum of Modern Art Kogaikan in Tokyo. Neil Tetkowski holds degrees from Alfred University and Illinois State University. He has been a professor at Denison University in Ohio, the State University College at Buffalo, and Parsons School of Design in New York City. He lives in Manhattan and is the Director of University Galleries at Kean University in Union, New Jersey.



*To Thine Own Self Be True*, 1993. Ceramic, 37 x 38 x 4 in.



## Neil Tetkowski: Chronology



1955 Born Buffalo, New York. Parents, Lenore and Clement Tetkowski, are both art teachers and Mexicophiles. Clement had hitchhiked to Mexico in 1943 and met Diego Rivera.

1960 Family drives to Mexico, Neil's first exposure to another culture; he climbs the Great Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan.

1961–62 Parents initiate study-abroad program in Siena, Italy, where Neil attends public school. Visits cultural landmarks with father's college students and travels extensively through Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Luxemburg, and England.

1963–64 Returns to Siena and attends the same public school. Travels extensively through Europe; is impressed by Greek and Roman ruins and the Paleolithic cave paintings in Altamira, Spain.



1965 Neil learns black-and-white darkroom techniques at home. Family camping trip in Volkswagen microbus to the American West Coast. Impressed by the ground-breaking exhibition, *Art Today: Kinetic and Optic*, featured at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York.

1967 Summer with father's college students in Mexico includes visits to Monte Alban, Mitla, and traditional craft villages in Oaxaca.

1969 Summer in Mexico; on July 16 watches moon landing in the small village of Patzcuaro, sees traditional pit firing in Amatenango del Valle in Chiapas.

1970 Makes first work in clay.

1971 Returns to Italy for the first time since elementary school, travels through Scandinavia, and is especially moved by a visit to Stonehenge in the United Kingdom.

1973 Begins art program at Alfred University, studies with Robert Turner, Val Cushing, and Wayne Higby.

1974 Builds first gas kiln at family home on Grand Island, New York.

1975 Leave of absence from Alfred University; continues art studies by traveling in Western Europe, with extended time in Venice, Switzerland, France, United Kingdom, and Austria. Visits Bernard Leach in St. Ives and Michael Cardew at Wenford Bridge and decides not to be a potter.





1975–76 Spends a month in Italy as a college student.

1977 Graduates from Alfred University with BFA and drives across the United States.

1978 Louise Nevelson purchases an early signature disc from his first exhibition at Clay and Fiber Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

1979 Shows and sells artwork at the Elements Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York.

1980 Graduates from Illinois State University with MFA. Hired as Assistant Professor and teaches photography and ceramics at Denison University in Ohio for the following three years.

1981 Experiments with large thrown forms, builds “pizza oven” kiln to fire first three-foot ceramic discs one at a time.

1982 *Orange Disk*, 1979, now in the collection of the Everson Museum of Art, featured on the cover of *Ceramics Monthly*, article written by Janet Koplos.

1983 Takes a group of students from Denison University to Mexico for the month of January; revisits inspiring pyramids and other landmarks in Oaxaca. Travels to Japan for the first time with Ban Kajitani and Bill Hunt. Leaves Ohio to teach at Buffalo State for the next four years. Elected life-time member of the International Academy of Ceramics in Geneva, Switzerland. Exhibits large discs for the first time at the Elements Gallery in New York City. Receives Individual Artist Fellowship Grant from the Ohio Arts Council.

1984 Solo exhibition at Ann Nathan/Objects Gallery in Chicago. *Earth Disk*, 1983, now in a private collection, featured on the cover of *Ceramica*, article written by Michael McTwigan. Residency at Art Park in Lewiston, New York. Begins doing workshops in Chicago, New York City, and Louisville.

1985 Makes large-scale work at Boston Valley Terra Cotta, an old brick factory near Buffalo. Returns to Tokyo for first solo exhibition at Akasaka Green Gallery. Major article by Hideto Satonaka is published in Japan’s preeminent ceramics magazine, *Hono-o-Geijitsu*. Artwork goes into the Museum of Modern Art Kogeikan in Tokyo. Solo exhibition at Nina Freudenheim Gallery in Buffalo, New York.





1986 Begins American Iron and Steel Series, fires found objects into clay. Teaches workshop at San Francisco State and visits Peter Voulkos in Oakland, California. Receives Artist Fellowship Grant from the New York Foundation for the Arts.

1987 Establishes live-work studio at 165 Ashland Avenue in Buffalo. Builds gas kiln and stays for seven years before moving to New York City. Solo exhibition at Franklin Parrasch Gallery, Washington, D.C.



1988 *Amber Mythos*, 1988, now in a private collection, is featured on the cover of *American Ceramics Magazine*, article written by Michael McTwigan. *Kinetic Form*, 1988, now in a private collection, is featured on the cover of *Buffalo Magazine*, article written by Anthony Cardinale. Returns to Tokyo for solo exhibition at Ueda Gallery on the Ginza. Makes work at three of the ancient kiln sites—Shigaraki, Bizen, and Tokoname; visits Hong Kong. Solo exhibition at Franklin Parrasch Gallery, Washington, D.C.

1989 Travels to Sweden and Germany and returns to Italy; stays in Venice and Siena.



1990 Returns to Stockholm for solo exhibition at Grafström Gallery. Spends October traveling in Italy. Solo exhibition at Frank Caro Gallery in New York City.

1991 Creates *Ground War*, a performed artwork with clay, bullets, and live music; later cast in bronze and purchased by a collector in Hiroshima, Japan. Teaches workshop at University of Hawaii, lectures at Contemporary Arts Museum, and exhibits at the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

1992 Third trip to Japan, second solo exhibition at Akasaka Green Gallery. Receives honorary citizen award from the city of Kanazawa, Japan. Solo exhibition at Hetjens Museum, Düsseldorf, Germany. *La'dor V'dor*, commissioned performance piece in Buffalo.



1993 Moves to 365 West 20th Street in New York City. Meets Louise Bourgeois, who lives and works a few doors away at 347. Solo exhibition at Dawson Gallery in Rochester, New York.

1994 Opens studio at 432 West 19th Street; installs large gas kiln, stays for the next ten years.





1995 Solo exhibition at Dorothy McRae Gallery, Atlanta, Georgia. Returns to Oaxaca.

1996 Solo exhibitions at Myung Sook Lee Gallery in New York City and Grafström Gallery in Stockholm. Travels to Sweden and Finland and teaches workshop at the University of Helsinki.

1997 Lectures at Museu de Arte de São Paulo in Brazil and teaches two-week workshop in São Paulo; teaches workshop in Caracas, Venezuela. Solo exhibition at JBK Gallery in Amsterdam.



1998 Common Ground World Project is officially endorsed by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the New York Foundation for the Arts. *Urban Ikebana*, a performed installation with Akihiro Kasuya at Cast Iron Gallery in New York, redefines nature to include the urban landscape.

1999 Most of the year is spent obtaining clay from 188 countries. Trip to Netherlands and Spain; personally digs clay from Andorra.

2000 Month of April at the United Nations creating the World Mandala with people from 188 countries.



2001 Solo exhibitions at the Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Museum of Western New York Art in Buffalo, the Flickinger Gallery in Buffalo, and the Museum of Arts and Sciences in Macon, Georgia. Spends summer in Italy, 40-year anniversary of the Siena Program. Photographs the destruction of the Twin Towers on September 11. Receives Ford Foundation grant.

2002 The *World Mandala Monument* is exhibited in the main lobby at the United Nations. Solo exhibitions at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, and the MacNeider Museum, Mason City, Iowa. Returns to Japan for the Kanazawa Project, involving 100 people ages 1 through 100. Visits Hiroshima for the first time.



2003 Solo exhibitions at the Columbus College of Art and Design, Columbus, Ohio, and the San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, San Angelo, Texas.

2004 Begins full-time at Kean University, Union, New Jersey. Travels to Copenhagen and London. Solo exhibition at Alfred University, Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art, Alfred, New York.



2005 Travels to Havana, Cuba, with studio residency in Santiago. Exhibits in the *Beijing International Art Biennale*. First trip to Korea, featured artist at *The 3rd World Ceramic Biennale* and studio resident at Yeosu.

2006 Solo exhibition at HPGRP Gallery in Chelsea, New York City.

2008 Solo exhibition at HPGRP Gallery in Chelsea, New York City.

2009 Returns to Italy for extended residency to make large sculpture at the Ditta Cresti terracotta factory in Petroio, Tuscany. First trip to Kyushu, Japan.



2010 Returns to Italy for exhibition at Petroio Museum of Terracotta. Solo exhibition at HPGRP Gallery in Chelsea, New York City.

2011 Major exhibition at Palazzo Comunale with Fabio Mazzieri, Alessandro Grazi, and Piergiorgio Balocchi entitled *Siena / New York*. 50-year Anniversary of the Siena Program.

2012 Artist residencies at Mesa Art Center, Mesa, Arizona, and at Hunter College, New York City; residency award at Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts, Newcastle, Maine. Solo exhibition at HPGRP Gallery in Chelsea, New York City.



2013 Travels to Beijing for solo exhibition at Renmin University. Receives the Premio Mario Celli award at the Palazzo Comunale in Siena. Artist in residence at Hunter College, New York City.

2014 Artist in residence at Hunter College, New York City. Paints *Niagara Gorge Series* on location. Returns to Tuscany.



2015 *Rethinking Mythos: A Mid-career Retrospective of Neil Tetkowski* at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, Waterloo, Ontario.

## Public Collections

American Embassy, Tokyo, Japan  
American Museum of Ceramic Art, Pomona, California  
Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe, Arizona  
Burchfield-Penney Art Center, Museum of Western New York Art, Buffalo, New York  
Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
Canton Museum of Art, Canton, Ohio  
Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
Castellani Art Museum, Niagara Falls, New York  
Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, Missouri  
Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York  
Gardiner Museum, Toronto, Canada  
Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, Georgia  
Hetjens Museum, Düsseldorf , Germany  
Honolulu Academy of Arts, Honolulu, Hawaii  
Huntington Museum, Huntington, West Virginia  
Icheon World Ceramic Center, Icheon, Korea  
Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois  
Illinois State Museum, Springfield, Illinois  
International Museum of Ceramics, Faenza, Italy  
City of Kanazawa, Japan  
Keramion Museum, Frechen, Germany  
Krone Museum, Idyllwild, California  
Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, California  
MacNider Museum, Mason City, Iowa  
Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester, New York

Morris Museum, Morristown, New Jersey  
Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland  
Museum of Applied Arts, Helsinki, Finland  
Museum of Arts and Design, New York City  
Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon, Georgia  
Museum of Modern Art, Buenos Aires, Argentina  
Museum of Modern Art, Kogeikan, Tokyo  
Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey  
Noyes Museum of Art, Oceanville, New Jersey  
Ohi Museum, Kanazawa, Japan  
Palace of Culture and Science, Warsaw, Poland  
Princessehof, Leeuwarden, Netherlands  
Racine Art Museum, Racine, Wisconsin  
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada  
San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, San Angelo, Texas  
Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art at Alfred University,  
Alfred, New York  
The Trout Gallery, Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania  
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.  
Suntory Museum, Tokyo, Japan  
Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York  
Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Republic of China  
Terracotta Museum, Petroio, Italy  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England



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## Exhibition Checklist

Unless otherwise noted, all artworks are ceramic.

1. *Vortical Vessel*, 1976  
9 x 17 in. diameter (p. 65)
2. *Earthenware Vessel*, 1981  
3 x 20 in. diameter (p. 10)
3. *Hovering Vessel*, 1981  
3 x 18 in. diameter (p. 39)  
Collection of the Gardiner Museum
4. *Diane's Meditation*, 1982  
4 x 11 in. diameter (p. 32)  
Collection of Diane Pokorski
5. *Earth Meditation*, 1982  
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6. *Indigenous Bowl*, 1982  
4 x 11 in. diameter (p. 32)
7. *Red Mesa Vessel*, 1982  
5 x 17 in. diameter (p. 32)
8. *Upside Bowl*, 1982  
4 x 17 in. diameter (p. 10)
9. *Machine Shop*, 1984  
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23 x 23 half x 4 in. (p. 69)
10. *Cable and Chain*, American Iron and Steel Series, 1986  
Ceramic, metal  
39 x 36 x 5 in. (p. 20)  
Collection of Jacques and Gabriele Israelievitch  
Photo credit: Bruce Mayer
11. *Car and Lake*, American Iron and Steel Series, 1986  
Ceramic, metal  
5 x 29 in. diameter (p. 45)
12. *Skyline*, 1988  
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13. *Severed Vista*, 1989  
15 x 35 x 3 in. (p. 40)
14. *Untitled Triptych*, 1989  
32 x 38 in. (pp. 58, 59)  
Collection of Linda Gellman
15. *Beyond Scylla*, 1990  
3 x 30 in. diameter (p. 27)
16. *Tracks Through Charybdis*, 1990  
3 x 36 in. diameter (cover, p. 48)  
Photo credit: Bruce Mayer
17. *Red Orange*, Galaxy Series, 1991  
3 x 32 in. diameter (p. 11)  
Collection of Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery
18. *Mythic Run*, 1991  
45 x 32 x 3 in. (p. 62)  
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19. *Railroad Mandala Vessel*, 1991  
Ceramic, metal  
3 x 16 in. diameter (p. 39)  
Collection of Linda Gellman
20. *Smokestack Mandala Series #3*, 1991  
Ceramic, metal  
13 x 6 x 6 in. (p. 44)
21. *Smokestack Mandala Series #5*, 1991  
Ceramic, metal  
13 x 6 x 6 in. (p. 44)  
Collection of Jacques and Gabriele Israelievitch
22. *Talon*, 1992  
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Photo credit: Bruce Mayer
23. *Manhattan*, 1993  
55 x 17 x 2 1/2 in. (p. 24)
24. *To Thine Own Self Be True*, 1993  
37 x 38 x 4 in. (p. 78)  
Photo credit: Bruce Mayer
25. *Family Portrait*, 1994  
4 x 38 in. diameter (p. 76)  
Photo credit: Bruce Mayer
26. *Torso*, 1994  
26 x 19 x 7 in. (p. 75)
27. *Duomo*, 1996  
49 x 27 x 5 in. (p. 43)
28. *Liquid Cavern*, 1996  
49 x 27 x 7 in. (p. 43)
29. *Red Stalag*, 1996  
50 x 24 x 5 in. (p. 42)
30. *Pelt*, 1997  
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31. *Soft Pillar*, 1997  
Ceramic, metal, glass  
23 x 7 x 6 in. (p. 6)  
Collection of Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery
32. *Writing Tablet*, 1997  
Ceramic, computer parts, metal  
50 x 34 x 5 in. (p. 68)
33. *Earth Pool*, Earthen River Series, 1998  
Ceramic, metal  
27 x 24 x 4 in. (pp. 2, 4)
34. *Installation 188*, 1998 thru 2000  
Clay, sand, glass, aluminum, cork  
24 x 3 1/2 x 4 ft.  
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35. *World Mandala Monument*, 1998 – 2002  
Ceramic, aluminum  
106 x 88 x 68 in. (pp. 21, 52, 54)  
Photo credit: Eva Heyd
36. *Eight Hands*, 1999  
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37. *11 Spikes*, 1999  
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41. *Spiked Mandala Series #5*, 2001  
Ceramic and metal  
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45. *Cuban School Children #3*, 2005  
Digital print  
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46. *Cuban School Children #4*, 2005  
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53. *Orange Funnel*, 2010  
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56. *Blackened Mythos*, 2012  
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57. *Blue T Construct*, Earth  
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58. *Constructed Spiral*, Earth  
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59. *Disk of Phones*, 2012  
5 x 29 in. diameter (p. 38)
60. *Dhow Drifter*, 2012  
15 x 18 x 12 in. (p. 15)
61. *Earthen Wings*,  
Earth Fragments Series, 2012  
22 x 22 x 3 in. (p. 18)
62. *Falling Mythos*, 2012  
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63. *Red Arizona Mythos*, 2012  
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64. *Mesa Tech Volcano*, 2012  
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Photographer Linda Gellman, 2014  
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68. *Niagara Gorge Project*, 2014  
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69. *White Contour I*, 2014  
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70. *White Contour II*, 2014  
31 x 18 x 11 in. (p. 17)

Unless otherwise noted, all artworks  
are in the collection of the artist and  
photography is by Bruce M. White.





## Acknowledgments

This retrospective project, *Rethinking Mythos*, has initiated for me a tremendous flow of memories and a sincere desire to make sense of the interconnected nature of my art and my life experiences. Unlike other shows, which are usually about new work, this time around I feel a deep sentiment associated with every object and every decision—and memories of all the people who have influenced my circumstances and opportunities. With that thought in mind, I am grateful to everyone who has helped me to find my way as an artist and as a human being. Surprisingly, I even appreciate the folks who got in the way, the difficult ones who in some odd manner closed doors (sometimes slamming them) and, without knowing it, contributed to the direction and purpose of this creative life.

My parents were the original free thinkers in my world and provided a completely unique platform of possibilities for me from day one. All of their discoveries gave me a significant jumpstart, a fabulous springboard that I clearly took for granted during my teenage years. I want to thank my friends throughout, especially in art school and beyond. Teachers, such as Bill Maggio in high school, provided a perfect environment for young creatives like myself, as did professors Bob Turner, Wayne Higby, and Val Cushing later at Alfred University. I wish it were possible to thank the long list of friends, assistants, and interns going back to the 1980s. A few individuals seem to have serendipitously altered my direction, particularly Bill Hunt and Ban Kajitani, who generously took me to Japan for the first time in 1983. And there were creative co-conspirators, including David Paris during the Ashland years in Buffalo and Linda Kuehne, Susan Martin, and Eric Hollender during the *Common Ground World Project*. I want to thank my daughter, Kristina Murphy, and my wife, Olga Valle Tetkowski, for their immeasurable support and keen understanding. I am grateful to the writers and magazine editors who have featured my work and the numerous museums and commercial galleries that took risks to show my art, going back to the Elements Gallery on Madison Avenue in 1979 and, in more recent years, Shuhei Yamatani of HPGRP Gallery in Chelsea. I also thank the collectors and patrons who have supported me financially, particularly a group in my home town of Buffalo.

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Neil Tetkowski  
February 2015



**Earth Fragments** exhibition, 2013, Renmin University, Beijing. China.



Opposite, detail: ***Earth Pool***, Earthen River Series, 1998. Ceramic, metal, 27 x 24 x 4 in.  
Back cover: ***American Iron and Steel Series***, 1986. Photograph by Charles Carlson Jr.



# RETHINKING MYTHOS

A Mid-career Retrospective of Neil Tetkowski



THE CLAY & GLASS  
EARTH • FIRE • LIGHT